In The Sweet Spring Time

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IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

VOL. III.

IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME

A LOVE STORY.

BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

"PATTY," "DIANE,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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AUTUMN.

IN THE SWEET SPRING-TIME.

CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG THE PINE-TREES.

YES, Oliver was now at that which had been the summit of his hopes. Hawkes had yielded with tolerable grace to his colleague's advice, and the young man found himself put on an equal footing with the two senior partners.

"You have had advantages we have never had, Burridge," Mr. Fildon said. "I saw, while you were ill, the sort of society you go among, and life has taught me that when a man's not a fool, so as to get his head turned by that sort of thing, the higher he rises the more power he gets. You're one of fortune's favourites. I

feel sure the mill will rise with you. Now we'll drink your very good health."

And Hawkes had echoed his partner's sentiments.

"Even a vulgar brute like that," Oliver said, "can appreciate me."

Till he was actually on his way to Bemford, he had not had time in which to think over what he should say to Gyneth.

There had been very much to arrange and plan with Mr. Fildon, for trade had been getting more active lately, and some extensive orders had had to wait for the chance of the hands coming to their senses—Oliver having, all through, protested against the introduction of foreign workmen into such an isolated place as Awlford. Now, with the wonderful increase of speed which would be given in executing orders by the improvement, it seemed to the partners that they must carry all before them, and Hawkes and Fildon urged on Oliver not to stay away an hour longer than he could help. The excitement of the whole affair had done much, so long as he remained in Awlford,

to quiet the bitterness of his disappointment; but, as he drew nearer and nearer to Gyneth, he found it even less possible to believe in her letter. He went over and over the matter from the beginning.

Before he spoke to her she had never shown any shrinking from him, it had grown to be established when he went to The Elms that she was the person to whom he chiefly talked, and who took the warmest interest in his hopes. Ah, that was the point on which to kindle sympathy, He would tell her of yesterday's success, and tell her that she had been his inspiration.

"I cannot have deceived myself altogether," he said. "Why, her sweet face used to flush, and her eyes use to shine and darken all at once when I told her of this possible success that lay before me. She couldn't have shammed all that, she's not a girl to sham, whatever Martha may say——" For the first time, he remembered Martha's letter. He pulled it out of his pocket and read it. He saw that he was wrong about Martha. She did not think

Miss Ralston a sham. She spoke of her almost warmly; but the end of the letter jarred on Oliver.

"Yet she does not love you as she ought to do, Oliver, and I know you better than to think that mere liking can make you happy. Think it well over, and do not marry her unless you can win her love. Remember, a woman who marries without love is not sure to end by loving her husband. I'm sure want of love in either one or other must be terrible; but you know this better than I do."

He frowned, and put the letter by.

"I was a fool to throw them together. Martha's desponding nature has told on Miss Ralston,"—he gave a sudden start—"it may be she who has put this confounded folly about 'want of love' into my dear little girl's head."

It was afternoon before he reached Bemford; he drove from Ryde to the ferry, and from the sandhills on the farther side of the harbour he got a lovely view of the sweet village of Bemford, nestling among trees and myrtle-bushes, overtopped by the spire of its church and the quaint gables of its rectory.

He was ferried across by a picturesque, cheery fisherman, with curly chestnut hair, dark eyes, and a face burnt golden by the sunshine, which seemed to have stamped an indelible brightness thereon—even in the little transit the man managed to beguile the way by various anecdotes, and the local history of Bemford.

"Yes, sir, there's a many visitors just now, as many as the place'll hold—they're like sprats in a barrel. Mister Venables—oh! yes, sir, you'll go straight up past that large white house, with 'lodgings' wrote up outside it, straight up atween two hedges, and you'll find yourself in the avenue, with the house a-facing of you."

The young boatman looked after his fare sharply, for Oliver gave him a nod when he landed, and hurried off without a word.

"That's a curious chap," said the ferryman. "Got some bad news, I fancy. I hope it's nothing as'll take the family back to London. They're gentlefolks they is, and none of the mean ways of some gentry about 'em neither; they spend their money like lords."

When Oliver reached the porch of the cottage,

he was informed that Mr. Venables and Miss Louisa were away, and that Mrs. Venables and Miss Ralston were not in.

"I don't think they can be far off, sir," the man said, blandly; and then he added, with a patronizing smile, "It is not easy, sir, to get far off in this place, it is so very small."

Oliver did not smile in return, he chafed at this hindrance, as he had chafed at the delay caused by the ferry; he did not even ask for the most likely direction, but went doggedly down the avenue towards the sea, very much out of humour. There was the sea in intensely blue beauty, framed in by the feathery green of the trees overhead, the fort standing out in sharp whiteness; but, as he got near the point, the sea seemed to be as full of varied colour as a shoal of mackerel—purple and rose, gold and crimson, and—welding all these into sweetest and most perfect harmony—a pearly grey, and this was opalesque in its constant change.

But Oliver did not stay to gaze at all this beauty, he saw the path leading along the cliff-side to the beach, and he went down this hurriedly; his creed was to do one thing at a time

only, and do that thoroughly. What he wanted to do now was to find Gyneth Ralston.

He soon came in sight of the seat under the pine-trees, where Gyneth had resolved on writing her letter. A lady was sitting there now, and he saw that it was Mrs. Venables. She was looking at the sea, and she started with surprise when he went up and spoke to her.

"Does my niece know you are coming?" she said, when he asked where he should find Miss Ralston.

"I think she will expect I should come," he said. "Shall I find her down there?" He looked towards the pine-trees lower down.

"Yes, she is sketching there, but——" She was going to add, "I will go with you," but Oliver was gone.

Mrs. Venables was anxious and unhappy. She had been with her niece all day, but Gyneth had gone on talking of all sorts of irrelevant subjects; she had not once seemed sad or silent, as she had been ever since her engagement to Mr. Burridge; her gaiety had been so persistent that Mrs. Venables felt sure it was forced—

evidently her niece did not intend to share her confidence with her. And now this sudden apparition of Mr. Burridge was startling. How abrupt and hard his manner was! Could Kitty —her Kitty—really love him?

"They have quarrelled, I suppose," she said, "and he has come down to make it up, and now they will be better friends than ever. I *must* reconcile myself to it; there is nothing against the man, only his rude manner and want of refinement. He's a good man, I'm sure. Perhaps Kitty is too wise and large-minded to care about such a trifle as manner; and yet,"—the sweet, dark eyes looked sadly wistful—"I think, earthly happiness depends so much more on little things than on large things."

Oliver went down the steep descent at a pace that sent little stones flying on as heralds of his approach; but, when he reached the short descent to the shingle, he saw that there was no one there. The path he had been following turned as it went on, and lost itself between trees on one side and a lofty growth of bramble and agrimony on the other, the trees making a cool shade overhead and a deep soft green gloom on

the path itself. It turned again when he got a little further, and there was a soft sound of running water, and on his right a huge elder-tree, bending thirstily down into the green darkness of the wood, but in front was the pine-clad slope, and beyond this the exquisite many-tinted sea. A little off the path, seated among the pine-trees on his left, was Gyneth.

She bent over her sketch-book, painting a rapid study of the colour on the sea. It would be truer to say she was trying to do this, and was feeling baffled at her want of success whenever she looked up at the original. She was so bent on making a fresh trial that she did not hear Oliver till he spoke to her. Then she looked up hurriedly. She felt confused, caught against her will, for she had determined not to see Oliver alone. But her natural courtesy helped Gyneth. She put her drawing on the ground, and shook hands with Mr. Burridge, succeeding so well in her attempt at composure that he hardly knew how to begin. But Oliver never hesitated long about anything; suspense was intolerable to him.

"You are not surprised to see me?" he said. "Won't you sit down again?" and he picked up her camp-stool, which had fallen down as she rose, and placed it ready for her. Then, as she sat down mechanically, he curled his arm round one of the red stems near him, and waited for her answer.

"I hoped you would not come."

"At least, you thought you hoped; but, indeed, I am sure you deceive yourself, you think I expect a great deal more from you than I have any right to expect, and so you put yourself in a false position."

He paused; but Gyneth shook her head, and then looked away over the sea. Oliver thought he would try another way.

"I came to talk to you for one thing," he said; "but, also, I came to tell you some good news, for you have always felt an interest in my progress."

She felt it such a relief to be able to look at him with real pleasure in her face.

"Yes, indeed," she said, eagerly; "then your improvement is successful?"

"It *must* have been a success in itself," he said, drily. Even to Gyneth he could not admit a possibility of failure where he was concerned. "The cause of satisfaction is that it is accepted as a real working power both by the mill-hands and their employers. I could hardly have looked for this so soon;" but he did not smile, his eyes were fixed severely on her downcast face.

She looked up now, and smiled at him. Oh, the heaven of that smile to Oliver! He resolved that he would never yield her up, she should be his in spite of herself.

"How glad you must be!"—a warm blush rose as she met his eyes, and made her face yet more exquisite.

"That depends on circumstances," he said, so gravely and sadly that the girl's eyes were fascinated. She kept them fixed inquiringly on his. "This unexpected result—for even I feared that some time must elapse before we could use the improvement freely—has put me at once into the position to which I looked forward when I spoke to your uncle;" then, breaking suddenly out of his grave, constrained

voice, "Oh! Gyneth, how can I be glad of anything unless you are willing to share it with me? What is any success worth without you?"

He trembled with the agitation that stirred him; but he did not move a step nearer to Gyneth. She pressed her hands together nervously. What could she say which would convince without wounding him?

"Why will you make us both so unhappy by persisting?" she said at last. "Why will you think you understand my feelings better than I understand them myself? I can only repeat what I said in my letter—stay, you must not urge me,—I am free; I have not promised myself to you, and I should be doing a great wrong if I were to promise to be your wife."

She rose from her seat at this, and stooped to gather her sketching-tools together.

"You might be doing wrong," he said, impatiently, "if you professed love and did not feel it—if you deceived me in any way; but listen a moment longer." She had turned to move up the path behind them, and he put his hand on her arm to detain her. "Gyneth, I have never yet failed in anything I have promised myself to suc-

ceed in, and I know I can win your love. I will make your life so pleasant and happy that you shall never have a wish unfulfilled, and"—he paused, he had been speaking fast in eager excitement; now his words came sadly—"my love for you no words could ever tell you, only what I will do for you can faintly try to show it. But though you do not care for my love, and I feel how unworthy an offering it is, still I offer it to you. I ask nothing in return but yourself. I leave you quite free to give me your love whensoever I shall succeed in winning it."

Gyneth drew her arm gently away.

"I can only give the same answer. I am very sorry, but indeed I never thought of you in that way. I believe in love too truly to think that any mere counterfeit can ever take its place."

"You know nothing about love," he said, vehemently. "Oh! Gyneth, why are you so hard? How can you give me such pain—you who have such a tender heart? Why is it so impossible to love me? How can you tell without trying?"

Gyneth had recovered herself. She thought

Oliver cruel to persist in this way, and her pity for him lessened. "I have tried," she said, gravely—"at least, I have thought about this ever since you first spoke to me—and I can only see it in one way."

"Then you dislike me," he said, bitterly; "you think me unworthy of you, and, while I try to win your love, I only incur your contempt."

He waited a moment, and Gyneth looked up at him with pleading, wistful eyes.

"You are unjust," she said. "Have you not been my friend?—have I not always liked you? Oh! why will you force me to give you pain?"

"You might have some pity." All the sternness had left his face; he bent his head beseechingly. "Gyneth, can you not see that I have laid up all the hopes of my life in you? You have been the spur which has urged me on to this success; you have made me a better man, too, for before I was only striving for myself—for my own vain glory. My darling, you have been everything to me." Then giving her a searching glance, and seeing only pain in her face, he went on

passionately—"Can you really—you so gentle and sweet and kind—can you persist in destroying all my life? Could you think that I took such delight in being with you, in listening to you, and did not want you always for my own? How glad you used to look when I came! you have turned from others to speak to me. Have a little pity; think how all this has fed my hopes, think again before you harden yourself against me."

Tears came fast to Gyneth's eyes; as she realised his sorrow she longed to comfort him. After all, must it not be right and good to make one life happy—to sacrifice herself for this true, loving heart? She thought of what Martha had said of the suffering of hopeless love. Could she give this pain to her friend? Could she give actual suffering to Oliver Burridge? He did not speak again, he stood watching her face in a kind of ecstasy of hope, for her lips trembled, and bright drops shone on her eyelashes. But with the thought of Martha other thoughts came too, and Gyneth suddenly recoiled as if she had found herself on the edge of

the crumbling cliff overhead. She shook her head very sadly.

"Please do not think me hard and unkind, but indeed I cannot do what you wish. I am more unhappy for you than I ever was, but I should add to your sorrow if I said I would marry you. I could never have any love to give you, and yet"—he turned from her angrily, and she put out her hand and laid it timidly on his arm —"indeed I care for you as a friend. Be satisfied that I am doing right for both of us."

He shook his arm with an angry movement, and his face flushed deeply.

"No, you are not doing right—don't deceive yourself, and don't talk about your friendship; you drive me mad by such cruel falseness. You give me the greatest pain a woman can give a man, and say you are doing right; you have no right to torture me by your sweet looks and soft words. Say you hate me in plain English; be honest; try to make yourself unlovable, instead of drawing me to you by every word you say and every look you give. My God!"—he closed his eyes tightly in contempt at the weakness

which made him still gaze at her—"what a fool I am, and how you must despise me!"

There was silence. Gyneth felt rooted to the spot; it seemed so cruel to leave him in such misery without a word of sympathy. She wiped away her tears, and tried to steady her voice; she felt so guilty, it seemed as if she deserved Oliver's rudeness, and yet she could offer no atonement for her refusal.

"You will believe my sorrow," she said, sadly. "I would do anything I could honestly to ease your pain—indeed, I grieve that you should suffer so."

A thrill in her voice caught his ear in the midst of his stormy passion; he looked at her with hard, hungry eyes.

"What do you know about my suffering?" he said. "What can such a cold nature as yours know about love? Tell me," he said, angrily, "has my sister had anything to do with this?"

Gyneth hesitated, and Oliver saw in an instant that she did so.

"Confound her jealousy!—it is only that."

The look of appeal came once more into his eyes. "Oh! Gyneth, it is she that has set you against me. Martha cannot bear to give me up; she is so besotted that she thinks no one good enough for me. Oh! my darling, try once more! Cast away all the false doubts her influence has called up, and try to think of me as you did before this misery came between us."

Gyneth could hardly speak. Each appeal of Oliver's opened her eyes more fully to the strength of his love, and made her see more plainly the danger she had escaped; for was not this intense love a confirmation of Martha's words, and of her own dreams? And yet, though she was resolved not to yield, she grew more and more pitiful towards him. She longed to take his hands in hers and comfort him, if she could only find a way; but at the same time she felt that she must vindicate Martha.

"Your sister is not to blame," she said; "she tried hard to make me say I—I would tell you the contrary of all this; she said to me much

that you have said yourself. Can you not believe that I feel for you—that I suffer in knowing what you suffer?"

A dull light, like the break of dawn, came greyly to Oliver, but at first he seemed to see it afar off, as if his head were really beneath some of those waves coming in long rollers over the shingle. He looked at Gyneth, and, as her eyes met his, she saw a keen suspicion in them.

"There is only one way of getting such knowledge," he said, slowly, but his voice rose and speech quickened as he went on; "you can't get it out of books, for books know nothing about real love—you must know it of yourself." Then, grasping her arm tightly, he said—"Why not say at once, 'I do not love you, because some one else has come between us?'"

Gyneth drew her arm away, and stepped backwards among the trees. She had flushed to her temples; her pride, as well as her reserve, were rudely shocked, and for a few moments she felt angry with Oliver. But one

glance at the anguish in his face conquered this, and again she thought of him, and not of herself.

"Indeed you are wrong," she said; "no one has ever loved me but you. How could I tell you what is not true?"

He looked at her sternly, almost fiercely.

"If you do love," he said, "it will be but just if you have to suffer as you have made me suffer."

He did not wait for her answer, but went hurriedly down to the shingle, and then turned in the direction of Foreland.

CHAPTER IX.

LOVE.

MARTHA had been very ill ever since her last walk with Gyneth. Sleep and appetite had both forsaken her. She felt feverish, and at odds with life. The trusty Jane—one of those fortunate mortals who, being never ill themselves, believe that suffering is a mere question of will, and that everyone might be well who chooses to be so—began to feel troubled about Miss Martha. She even went so far as to make her some beef-tea, and stood over her while she drank it, and she suggested that port wine was sold at the post-office. But Martha shook her head decidedly, and said that she understood best how to manage herself.

She sat for hours on the sands, brooding

silently, going over in thought that sweet, anxious time at Awlford, the time that seemed so far off and unreal now. Sometimes, when she thought of the hours that she and Maurice had spent together, of all the kind things he had said and done, it seemed to her that he must surely care for her, and then Lady Mary's lofty manner, and the gulf that it had made between her own position and Maurice's, took away all hope. Then she told herself that her love was a folly, that she must struggle against it till it was conquered.

"Impossible," she said. "I might as well hope to root up one of these monstrous stones that seem to underlie the shingle. I must tear my heart out first; what harm can my love do to anyone but myself? All I ask is, that some day I may be able to help him in some way; to nurse him through an illness, to minister to his comfort, so that I may be able to see him again."

Besides this constant heartache for herself, there was the strain of Oliver's disappointment. She scarcely dared to think of this, of how he would bear it.

"Oliver never could bear thwarting," she said, "at least, he bore it as a man bears pain, not as a woman does. He fought with it, and so made it twice as hard, and he will do this now."

She longed to be with him. Thinking over all this, took her, for the time, out of her own sorrow, while she wondered where he was, and whether he would appeal against Miss Ralston's decision. "Oh yes, he will not believe her," she said. "He will come down to Bemford—he is so masterful—and perhaps he will persuade her against her will."

She was so weak this morning that she had made no effort to go out. Jane had brought her a cup of tea, but she felt too restless and excited to eat, and she sat in a low chair in the little bow-window facing the open sea. She had felt the heat of the last few days, and she wore an often-washed Tussore gown, which made her look still paler, but her eyes were full of light, and she sat watching the sea as if she expected a message might be coming to her in one of those far-off fishing-boats.

The window was open, and through it sounded the pleasant hum of the bees, busy amongst the roses and honeysuckles trained on each side of the windows below; some of the subtle perfume that came in was from a starry-flowered myrtle that must have been as old as the house itself, and which reached nearly to the top of Martha's window, and darkened one side of it by its wealth of shining leaves. Above the quiet hum of the bees, in strong contrast with that suggestion of genial domestic leisure, came the sad, dull roll of the waves against the beach, below the green strip of hedge-bordered meadow in front of the cottage. It was a soothing, cool retreat, and yet Martha was full of feverish unrest.

She felt that she was listening and waiting for something, as if her life, till lately so monotonous and colourless, had begun a new phase of active excitement, and that, unless events followed one another quickly, this unnatural pulsation, which kept her night and day in a state of strained expectation, would not be stilled.

So that now, when she heard the gate unlatched and then closed, as if pulled by an impatient hand, and then a man's tread on the sandy walk, she felt no surprise, only a sort of relief that suspense, for the present, was over. But who was it? She listened intently as footsteps sounded on the little staircase. Her heart sank again, and beat more quickly. Jane was not coming up with the visitor. It must then be Oliver.

He came in just as she rose up to meet him. He received her kiss in silence, and sat down.

His face was deeply flushed, and he took out his handkerchief and wiped it; he had been walking as fast as he could ever since he left Gyneth so abruptly. It had seemed to him that, if he stayed with her in his present mood, he might be tempted to kill her in his fury of jealous disappointment. But the walk had not been long enough to tire him out, or to give him time to strive for some mastery over the storm that filled his soul. For a moment the tender beauty of the scene when he reached the cottage quieted and refreshed his senses; now his sister's

unnatural pallor touched his heart. "Are you ill, Martha?" he said, quickly.

She smiled, but she felt nervous. His face had told her that he had met Gyneth, and also the result of this meeting.

"No, thank you, not ill. I'm well—in fact, quite well."

"You look worse than when you left Awlford," he said. "Have you been taking long walks? You know," he went on, severely, "the doctor said you were specially to avoid long walks."

"I have not walked very far. I have only been to Bemford; but I avoid that climb through the pine-trees, and go another way."

Oliver winced. Involuntarily he looked at his coat-sleeve, and there, on the dark grey stuff, was the mark of the grasp in which he had held the pine-tree during his talk with Gyneth. His anger rose again.

"What did you mean," he said, abruptly, "by writing all that nonsense about Miss Ralston?"

Martha grew paler still, but a flush came to her cheeks when she began to speak.

"I wrote no nonsense, Oliver. I had two long talks with Miss Ralston, and it seemed only right to tell you the convictions they brought me."

"Oh, you women!" he said, roughly. "If there is mischief to be made, commend me to a woman to make it, to twist the smallest thread of discord into a rope fit for a capstan. Why could you not leave her alone? What right had you to judge or to meddle in my affairs? You've done more harm than you can ever undo."

He spoke sullenly over his shoulder, without even looking at her. Martha did not answer—she was thinking far more of her brother's sorrow than of his accusation. And yet she did not know how to speak to him. For the first time in her life she was called on to pity Oliver for a failure.

"You have seen Miss Ralston?" she said, at last.

"Yes, of course I have." He got up and went to the window. "What a stuffy little room this is!" he said, impatiently. "I feel as if I should send my head through the ceiling."

He put his head out and leaned over the window-sill, looking at the sea. Martha's white face, and the traces of illness on it, had checked the impulse of vengeance with which he had hurried to Foreland along the rough beach. But at Gyneth's name this impulse had leaped into a burning impatience to vent on some one the wrong he had suffered.

Martha lay back in her chair. She knew it was best to leave Oliver alone, but it was so sad to see him so unhappy. She spoke at last, in a timid, hesitating voice.

"It is all right at Awlford, is it? About the machine and the men, I mean?"

He came in from the window, and stood looking at her.

"Yes, it's all right. I suppose that's about all you care for with regard to me, Martha. Oh! I know you are a pattern sister! You care for your brother's health, and his worldly comforts and prosperity before anything else; and what is prosperity, or comfort, or money worth, I should like to know, beside happiness?"

There was a pause. Martha's heart seemed to stand still, and everything grew indistinct around her; but in a few minutes she roused herself, sat up and looked piteously at Oliver. Her mute appeal acted like a challenge.

"All there was need for you to say to her," he went on, vehemently, "was that my love was so entirely hers that I was sure to make her happy. I thought you so devoted to me, I so counted on your affection to help me with her, or I should never have put you in the way of being together here."

He checked himself. Martha's white face frightened him, it had become so deathly. This attack loosed her tongue.

"Oliver, you are unjust. I urged her strongly to marry you. I told her how long and how well you had loved her, but I could not make any impression on her. At our last talk I gave up persuading her, for I saw that she was right."

Oliver interrupted her.

"I knew it," he said, savagely, "I knew it as well as if I had listened to your talk. I knew that gentle, yielding girl could not have

remained obstinate if she had not been encouraged to do so."

"Oliver,"—Martha rose up, and held by the chair back, for she felt dazed and giddy—"you are like a child who tries to catch at flame because he wants its brightness; he cannot realize that his hand will burn. I do not think that any persuasion would induce Miss Ralston to marry you; but, even if it did, she does not love you; she knows you well, more than that, she can appreciate your best qualities, but you have failed to touch her heart. Oliver, if that girl married you with her present feelings, she would grow to hate you. She has a free nature, she is no ordinary silly girl, ready to take a husband in the first man who asks her. She will choose for herself. Perhaps she will go through life unmarried. But, if she were meant to love you, she would have loved you long ago."

"Nonsense," he said, angrily; "but I am a fool to listen to your folly. What does a recluse like you know about love? You have got some old-fashioned romantic ideas of love

out of books into your head. Don't you know that every generation brings a fresh current of ideas with it about everything—love and marriage as well as other things."

Martha's face was not pale now, there was flame in her cheeks and in her eyes as well.

"I know that I am ignorant about most things, and it is quite possible that now-a-days marriage is thought of more lightly than it used to be. The newspapers tell me this, for I read them more than you think, Oliver, and it disheartens me to see both in them and also in books that sins, the name of which used to make Englishwomen blush, are now talked about openly as recognized facts among us. But I do know about love, Oliver. It cannot change any more than men or women can really change, though their manners and customs may alter."

"But what can your knowledge of love have to do with your advice to Gyneth Ralston?" he said, with a contemptuous smile.

"Because I have changed my mind. Perhaps

I have gone back to my first idea of her. She has a deep nature, though she seems so yielding and gentle, and, if she loves, she will love with all her strength."

"I know it," he said, angrily; "don't drive me mad by saying it. And why should you conclude that her love would not be for me? Girls often affect dislike to the very men they marry afterwards."

Martha shook her head.

"Miss Ralston is not one of those girls, Oliver, though at first I thought she was. I fancied she was shallow, and that she could make herself fond of anyone who was kind to her,"—she looked at her brother, and her lip curled. "I suppose you know as well as I do that most of these girls who marry men because they ask them are only *fond* of their husbands, they never know what love is; and if I had gone on thinking her nature shallow I should have gone on persuading Miss Ralston to marry you."

In the midst of his trouble Oliver was surprised and interested, not only because Martha

was revealing herself to him in a new and unexpected way, but because he hoped that she might have got the clue to the suspicion that so tortured him.

"And what may have stopped your persuasive powers?"—he still spoke with sarcasm, but more as if he cared for an answer now.

Martha paused to think. She passed one hand slowly over her forehead, while she steadied herself by the other still holding the back of her chair.

"I suppose it is difficult to say how one gets an impression," she said, "nor can one trace exactly when it comes. I believe this feeling about Miss Ralston came to me sooner than I knew, and that I hardened myself against it; but I am sure it is a true one, for it increases whenever I think of her. She might be persuaded to marry a man without loving him, but she would do it with her eyes open; she would never mistake mere soft affectionate feeling for love, because I am sure she fully believes in love."

"Why do you feel sure?" he said, stern-

ly. He felt so impatient for her answer that he could have shaken her when she hesitated.

She was trying to recall some special remark to bring forward as proof; she had no doubt about what she asserted.

"I think it was something like this," she said, flushing as she spoke. "I spoke of a marriage where the woman did not love her husband, and then learned to love some one else."

Oliver interrupted her.

"How could you dare to speak of such a thing to her?"

"Because," Martha looked at him steadily, "all at once it came to me that my will was stronger than hers is, and that I might at last persuade her, and then I saw what would happen if I led her into temptation."

"Temptation to marry without loving!" he scoffed. "What nonsense you have got in your head! I thought you too quiet and sensible, Martha, for such rodomontade; do you really think a well brought-up woman ever forgets herself in the way you mean?"

Martha no longer steadied herself by the chair, her strength had come back with the firm contradiction she felt against Oliver's opinions. Generally she had submitted to be guided by his judgment, but on this subject she could not yield.

"Oh, how can you, of all people, make such a mistake?" she exclaimed. "You know what love is, and yet you fancy that, 'being well brought-up,' as you call it, will make a woman proof against love. I do not say that a good girl, when she is a wife, will yield to her love; but, the better she has been taught, the more intensely she will suffer, for the love itself will seem a sin to her, and she and it will struggle together till one or the other perishes." She saw Oliver shudder, but he kept silent, and she went on—"That is the fate I foresaw all at once for Gyneth Ralston, and, if you had seen her horror at the thought of it, you would agree with me that she believes in the awful power of love."

Oliver waited a few minutes, then he said, boldly,

"Do you mean me to understand from all this

that she had some attachment——" He listened eagerly for her answer.

"I cannot tell; sometimes I have thought so, and then I doubted; if she has, she scarcely knows it herself."

Oliver's heart sank; this had been his own conclusion after he had left Gyneth, and yet, as he thought over Martha's confession, and the evident frankness with which Miss Ralston had spoken to her, it seemed to him that his sister's discernment would have found out the truth. He wished he had not spoken so hastily to Gyneth, and yet—Martha's voice broke harshly into the silence.

"Whether this is so or not, I do not see that it makes any difference; from all you have told me, it seems that Miss Ralston has lived far more quietly than she would as your wife, for I suppose you are a rich man now."—She looked at him with a proud smile. —"You deserve to be—that is, if being rich means being happy." Oliver turned away. "I mean," she went on, "that she would be more and more admired the more people saw her—

admired and—who knows?—loved, no doubt, and I feel sure she must love some day, too; her eyes tell me so."

Oliver muttered to himself; but still he listened, turning half away.

"Well, then, this is what I said to her; she must never marry without being sure she loves her husband, or that dreadful misery will come upon her of which I spoke just now."

Oliver turned on her impetuously, but Martha raised her hand to impose silence.

"I must say it," she said; "I do not say she is a girl who would be wicked, but she would suffer. Oh, Oliver, there is no suffering like the torture of a love without hope."

Oliver's brows met till his eyes looked small beneath them.

"And you told her all this," he said, sternly.

"Yes, I told her." She waited a minute, and then she said, "Think how it must add to the torture when a woman is bound to some one whom she ought to love; think what it must be to love from duty only——"

"You are talking of what you don't under-

stand," he said, angrily—"the mere ravings of a woman who studies human nature in books; every proper-minded woman loves her husband. But that doesn't signify. What does signify is, that you have ruined my happiness; you have set Gyneth Ralston against me, and she has refused me so decidedly that I have no hope left, you——"

Martha came forward, but he was too excited to see how unsteadily she walked.

"I am so grieved for you, so disappointed, dear Oliver," she said, and she put her hand on his arm. "I would do anything to help you, but she would never have made you happy, so it is for you that I am glad——"

"Glad!"—he pushed her from him—"Martha, if anyone had told me you would be glad over my sorrow, I would have knocked him down. No, don't stop me—I can't stay; I should say something we should never forget. Let me go, I say!"

For she caught at his arm with imploring earnestness, and cried out to be heard. He would not hear, he would not see the agony of

the pale, upturned face; he hurried away quickly down the stairs, through the garden; he seemed not to pause till he found himself on the other side of the ferry, on his way back to Ryde.

CHAPTER X.

A CONFIDENCE.

GYNETH had avoided her aunt till evening, but now dinner was over, and they were alone in the drawing-room together. The room was small and square; there were no cosy nooks into which she could retreat from the full light of the unshaded lamp, and she felt that Mrs. Venables must see that she had been crying. For she had not gone home after her meeting with Oliver; she longed to be quite alone, and she had walked through the village into the open country, past the mill, where four paths meet, and taking at hazard the one directly in front, which ran side by side with the blue harbour stretching inland to Brading, she

reached a wood, at the foot of a steep descent. She paused here, tired out, for the way up, she saw, would lead her by a steep climb to the top of the long green stretch of down which shuts out Sandown, and terminates in the bold white headland that forms one point of the bay. Gyneth wished she could have reached this lonely bay, but her strength was spent, and she sat down on a tree stump, more for rest than thought; she did not want to think; she was still frightened and full of agitation from what she had gone through, and she burst into a hearty fit of crying.

When this was over, she wiped her eyes, and took her way slowly home. And yet her heart felt so strangely lightened that she called herself unfeeling. There could be no doubt that she had made Mr. Burridge very unhappy, but this meeting had confirmed her doubts; there was no real sympathy between them; and then, as she tried to realize his feelings, the heaviness on her heart came back. It was impossible to Gyneth to believe that she could be necessary to the happiness of any man, and she thought Oliver ex-

aggerated. She was sure he would easily find a wife who would suit him much better.

She shrank from telling her aunt what had passed, and yet, even if Mrs. Venables did not question her, Gyneth felt that she must be told; she longed to go back to the confidence that had always been between them before Louisa's return, but something—a shrinking from her aunt's penetration—held her back.

Usually Mrs. Venables knitted in the evening, but to-night she had taken up a book, so as not to appear silent. She had felt the constraint that had come between them even more than Gyneth had, and she had drawn her own conclusions; but, spite of the deep interest she felt, she had resolved not to force Gyneth's confidence. It was a matter, she considered, which her niece must decide for herself.

Gyneth had also got a book, but she could not read; her excitement had not quieted, and she longed for courage to speak. The door opened, and the man came in with a telegram. It was from Mr. Venables, and ought to have reached them hours sooner, but, as no messenger

was forthcoming, the sleepy Brading post-office had kept it till some one who was walking to Bemford undertook charge of it.

"Your uncle will not come back to-morrow," Mrs. Venables said. "Louisa likes Cowes, so they stay on a few days." Then, with her sweet bright smile, she went on—"So we shall have to amuse each other for perhaps a week longer, Kitty."

Somehow that smile broke the barrier which had kept these two apart. Gyneth laid down her book; she scarcely thought, she made no plan, but, as if led by instinct, she placed herself on the stool at her aunt's feet, and, laying her clasped hands in her lap, she held up her mouth for a kiss. Something very like joy was shining out of her sweet dark eyes as Mrs. Venables bent down her delicate faded face and kissed the fresh warm lips. Then the girl made prisoner of her aunt's hand, and laid her cheek on it.

"I feel so happy to-night." She sighed.

Mrs. Venables stroked her hair softly. These two reserved and yet frank women understood

each other as well as if they had spoken for an hour—the frankness was a part of their simple characters, the reserve was half timidity, half dislike to speaking about themselves.

"I am happy, too, dear," the elder woman said.

Gyneth felt for the hand that stroked her hair, and, having caught it, she kissed it; then, sitting upright, she looked saucily at her aunt.

"What would Uncle Charles say, I wonder? Shall I tell him that his telegram made you happy—you, who always seem like a lost sheep when he is away?"

But she only got a smile for answer. The girl laid down her head again, kissing the hand against which her cheek nestled.

"Shall I tell you what helps *me* to be happy to-night, dearest?" she said. "I am free again. I have told Mr. Burridge that I cannot love him —cannot marry him."

Mrs. Venables felt a sudden joy, and then she checked herself.

"But, my dear child, why did you enter into this engagement, if it was so soon to be broken?"

"It was not an engagement. I told Louy it was not, but she would not believe." Gyneth pushed the hair away from her eyes. "Oh! aunt, I believe, if I had told you everything at first, you would have stopped it at once; but——" She paused.

"It was my fault, not yours, dear," said Mrs. Venables. "I took an unwarrantable dislike to Mr. Burridge, and you saw it, and so you thought I should certainly decide against him—it is a lesson to me about fastidiousness. Poor man, I am very sorry for him. Then you have been struggling ever since, my poor child?" She bent down, and kissed her. "But, Kitty dear, why did you give him hope at first?"

"That is just what I can't understand. I think it must have been that he was so masterful; he would not listen; he said he had been hasty to speak so soon, and that I could not know my own feelings, and that I ought to let him try to win me; but, instead of this, I found that I grew almost to dislike him, and that last evening at Fulham I can't tell how I felt. I was angry with myself for being so unreasonable."

"You puzzled me that evening; it seemed to me that you shrank from Mr. Burridge."

Gyneth sat silent; then, pressing her hands together, she looked up at her aunt.

"I feel ashamed of myself to-night; it is so difficult to believe that I am necessary to his happiness, or that he thinks so; but yet, when I recall his face,"—tears came to her eyes—"I am afraid he is very unhappy."

"Had you written? He looked angry when I saw him on the cliff."

"Lean back in your chair, dearest, and I will tell you everything. I know you were puzzled by my fancy for Miss Burridge; well, I do like her very much. She is a remarkable and high-minded woman, I am sure; but, after we got here, I saw how silly I was to have let myself be so drawn to her, when I felt each day more sure that I did not love her brother. Well, I met her on the sands before you came down, and I liked her better than ever, and then she talked about her brother, and I told her the truth. At first she was angry, but afterwards I fancied she softened towards me. I believe

she had thought I wanted to marry her brother because he was likely to be well off; still for some time she was very firm. She said I had made her brother love me, and I was bound to marry him. I can't tell you how miserable I felt. If you had been here, I believe I must have gone to you for comfort. It was so terrible to think I had deceived him, and brought all this trouble on myself; but, as I considered it, I saw that I had not done this. I always thought of Mr. Burridge as a friend; but I had no special feeling for him. I remember that at the garden-party I wanted him to go and talk to Louisa. I never cared to have him all to myself, so it seemed to me that, if my intention was right, I ought not to feel guilty. When I saw Martha Burridge again, somehow we began to talk about love, and then she spoke very strongly on the sin of marriage without love on both sides. I told her I found I could not love him in the way he wished, and I said I had determined to write to him, and she did not oppose it. I think she was convinced I did not love him, though at first she had tried so hard to

persuade me that I did not understand my own feelings. I was so afraid uncle would say this too, that I thought I would do it all myself without troubling you, dearest." Gyneth paused exhausted by her unusual flow of words.

"You did not tell Louy?"

Gyneth shook her head.

"Louy and I have quite different ideas about marriage. She will be very angry, I am afraid."

Mrs. Venables sighed.

"I wish you had told me, poor dear child; you must have been sadly puzzled."

"But then, if uncle had taken Mr. Burridge's part, you could not have taken mine, you know," said Gyneth, with a bright smile. "It was really that which kept me silent."

Mrs. Venables pressed her hand; but she sat looking grave and perplexed.

"I am so sorry now," she said, "that I gave way to that prejudice against Mr. Burridge, and that I let you see it, for, after all, his are only outside faults, and will very likely disappear as he mixes more in society. It is partly because I have had no children to train—living for so many

years alone with your uncle—but I have taken a habit of showing my opinions freely, and I quite forgot that you might be influenced by them."

Gyneth looked up at her.

"You seem to forget your own theory about love; if it is really something living, and has a spontaneous growth, how can opinion influence it?"

Mrs. Venables smiled, and stooped to kiss her niece.

"One cannot lay down any absolute theory," she said, "so much depends on character and temperament; but still I think you, Gyneth, would not have been altogether influenced by my opinion. You have shown in this matter how entirely you can judge and act for yourself; only I hope you have not been hasty—of course, in the opinion of the world, you have done a very foolish thing indeed."

"You know I am not ambitious. I do not care to marry a rich man."

"I am quite sure you would not, dearest, marry from merely low motives; but here is a

man with plenty of good qualities, as well as a brilliant future. I can't help thinking that, as you are free from any other attachment, you might have given him a longer trial."

Gyneth did not look up at her aunt.

"It would have made it far worse for him," she said, in a low voice.

But Mrs. Venables sat silent; it seemed as if she had expected a different answer.

CHAPTER XI.

A SURPRISE FOR MAURICE PENRUDDOCK.

MAURICE PENRUDDOCK had been, meantime, deciding that life had never seemed so unbearable in London as it was this August. All his friends had left town; his mother was paying a round of visits, and he could have joined her if he had chosen, but just now he felt strangely out of sympathy with his mother. It seemed to him that she took more interest in Oliver's happiness than she did in his, and this puzzled him.

He was warmly attached to Oliver, and proud of having him for a friend; but then he was a man, and, though he saw Oliver's faults of manner, and his self-assertiveness of disposition,

he did not shrink from them, as he thought most refined women would.

"But I must be wrong, after all," he said; "my mother is fastidious about manner, and I thought *she* was, too. I can't understand her loving him."

But when he reached this point he always had to rouse himself to the remembrance that Gyneth Ralston would before long be married to his friend, and then he tried to think of something else.

He had had a letter from Martha this morning, and his thoughts turned naturally to her. He felt sure she was very ill; she did not speak of her health, though his letter, to which this was an answer, had made special inquiry about it; but there was a dull, hopeless tone in her letter, especially when she spoke of Oliver, that puzzled Mr. Penruddock.

Was Martha selfish? He had always thought her a special example of unselfishness, and yet it seemed as if, instead of rejoicing with her brother, she was given up to sorrow at the idea of losing him.

"I wonder if I could cheer her a bit," and he half planned a run down to Bemford, and then checked himself.

But he could not shake off his anxiety about Martha. He knew her shyness and reticence so well. She might be very ill, and yet she would not get courage to speak of it, and he had learned at Awlford that she would let illness strike her down before she would complain. He loved Martha very dearly, and it flashed upon him as he stood thinking over her letter that it was quite possible that Oliver, wrapt up in his new happiness, was dulled to any anxiety about his sister, and had not troubled himself with her health.

"He may be in town," he said; "he is like a Will-o'-the-wisp in the way in which he travels about; a railway journey is no more to him than going from one house to another is to another man. I will call on him."

It was a disagreeable duty, and yet it was not all duty. Maurice felt that Martha's image had been much with him these last days, and her letter had made the anxiety for her a tor-

ment. Yes, he must find out about her from her brother.

He smiled when he found himself on his way to the office Oliver occupied for carrying on his London business.

"About the last place I should have thought myself likely to go to when I saw him at the station," he said. "However, it must be got over some time, and so it is as well."

But, nevertheless, he looked disappointed when he heard that Oliver was at home, and he followed the clerk into the inner office with a very unusual feeling of embarrassment, and also of some discontent with himself for having yielded to what he now considered unnecessary worry about Martha.

Oliver's voice reached him in the passage.

"What a blockhead you are! I'm busy—no time for anyone."

"It's Mr. Penruddock, sir; he's here."

Maurice went forward at this, and the abashed clerk hastily retreated and shut the door.

Oliver was standing before the empty fireplace. He had evidently come off a journey,

for a hat and coat and bag lay where he had just flung them down. There was not a vacant chair, and Oliver's face had a thundercloud in it, though he held out his hand to his friend.

"Just arrived?" said Maurice, as he looked at the bag.

"Yes," said Oliver; then, with an effort at cordiality, he cleared some papers off one of the chairs and asked Penruddock to sit down.

"I came to inquire for Martha," said Maurice. "I hope she is better."

The sudden flush and excitement in his friend's face startled Maurice.

"Don't talk about her," Oliver said, savagely. "She's ill, and I don't suppose my visit has made her better; but I'll tell you one thing, Penruddock, if you haven't found it out for yourself: never trust any woman's tongue; it's the very devil, and Martha's no better than the rest."

Maurice felt surprised and puzzled; it seemed impossible that Oliver could be speaking so harshly of his sister.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" Mr. Pen-

ruddock said, kindly, with the half playful, wholly sweet look in his eyes which had won Oliver's confidence in his boyish days—"you seem out of sorts."

Oliver turned angrily away, and began to look over some papers on his desk. He had been so accustomed to pour out all his troubles to Martha, sure of her patient and sympathetic listening, that it was now as if double weight had been added to his disappointment.

"How have matters progressed at Awlford?" his visitor said. This seemed a subject which no woman's tongue could have affected.

Oliver answered sulkily, over his shoulder—

"All right; the hands are at work, and so is the invention."

"Bravo! that's capital. I can't tell you how glad I am to hear it, old boy," said Maurice, cheerily.

The hearty tone touched Oliver; he turned round as he answered—

"Well, I'm not. Now it's all right, I seem to want the excitement of doubt; this plain-sailing is dull work compared with the other."

"In short, you want another broken head," said Maurice.

"God knows what I want," was the answer.

Maurice looked hard at him, and their eyes met. The elder man read as in a book both trouble and sorrow in those open blue eyes, and yet he felt that it would be forcing confidence were he to question Oliver.

But that deep, loving glance had been full of friendly sympathy, and Oliver spoke as if in answer to words.

"Yes, I'm altogether out of sorts," he said, abruptly, and not looking at his companion, "I came away from Bemford yesterday, and travelled up by a night train."

"You have seen Martha, then?"

"Oh! confound Martha,"—with an impatient movement of his shoulders. "Of course I saw her; but I did not go down expressly to see her, if you mean that."

Maurice felt thrown back; but he strove to maintain his sympathy.

"Miss Ralston is at Bemford, is she not?"

Oliver looked full of wrath in an instant, and his eyes glittered.

"How do you know that?"

"I have heard from Martha twice since she went down."

Oliver's face darkened. In his anger he overlooked probabilities. Was there something then, after all, between his friend and Martha, and did Maurice know what had happened?

"If you hear from Martha," he said, irritably, "why on earth do you come and ask me about her health? She tells you how she is, I suppose?"

The tone was so quarrelsome that Maurice felt angry—almost disgusted. But next moment he smiled at his old friend.

"You have some trouble on your mind, old fellow, and perhaps you would rather be alone. I'll look in another day."

"Stop a minute. Has Martha said anything to you about—about Miss Ralston?"

"She told me she was at Bemford, and she had seen her, that was all. Martha is never very communicative; you know that."

Oliver walked up and down the narrow room. At last he stood still, in front of Maurice.

"She has altered, then. What will you say when I tell you she has made mischief between Miss Ralston and me? She has done me the greatest harm one person can do another by her foolish tongue. Now you know what I meant just now."

He resumed his walk up and down. It seemed to Maurice as if the words he had listened to were not true, that next minute Oliver would laugh, and say it was a hoax. He stood silent, with the dazed feeling of unreality with which we awake from some dream.

"Have you quarrelled with Miss Ralston, then?" he said, at last.

"I'm an awful fool." Oliver was working himself up, so as to get rid of the anger that was almost choking him. "I have spoilt my life by not holding my tongue, and here I am, blabbing like a school-girl. I see you're curious, Penruddock, so I may as well tell you myself as leave the story to Martha's version." Maurice flushed, but the pain in Oliver's voice kept him silent. "Do you know, I actually planned that those two should be together at Bemford be-

cause, like a fool, I trusted Martha's love for me would help my cause—and she has ruined it. D'ye see now?" The perplexity in Penruddock's face irritated him into almost brutal impatience. "Don't you understand?" he said.

"No; I thought you were engaged to Miss Ralston."

"I thought so, too, like a poor deluded fool; but she had not given me a decided answer. She said I had taken her by surprise; that she did not mean what she said; we weren't suited to one another. Martha argued with her; but what's the use of discussing it—the thing's at an end," and he turned away, and began sorting his papers.

Maurice felt excited almost beyond control, but he spoke quietly.

"Do you mean to say that there is no engagement between you and Miss Ralston?"

"Yes. Haven't I told you so?" Oliver spoke sullenly again; he thought Maurice strangely unfeeling to dwell in this way on his trouble.

Maurice was indeed powerfully moved; like

all reserved natures, when impulse got possession of him, it carried him fairly out of himself. The love which he had so sternly put away, to which he had so striven to be blind and deaf, leapt into sight, and was beckoning him to follow its guidance.

"But"—he forced himself to speak slowly—"perhaps you have been hasty; this may be only a temporary coldness, a lovers' quarrel, which will leave you better friends than ever."

Oliver had gone back to his papers; but he flung round now, with eyes full of indignation.

"So likely," he said, with a sneer; "how little you know about women; when a girl says she can't have anything to say to you, and she never has cared one bit for you, so likely that love will grow out of such a dispute as that."

"Then you absolutely give her up?"

"I have no choice," said Oliver, sullenly. "She has given me up." Then he looked keenly at Maurice, and some of the bitterness of his wounded spirit found vent. "What do you

mean by asking all these questions?" he said. "Do you think I find it pleasant to discuss such a miserable business?"

Then he threw himself into his chair and went back to his papers; he hoped his visitor would leave him.

But Maurice stood still and silent; he must be honest with Oliver, and yet he shrank from bringing his hope, so full of joy, face to face with the wreck of his friend's happiness.

At last Oliver looked up impatiently, and Maurice felt that he must speak; this might be his only chance.

"You might be sure I had some reason for asking," he said, in an agitated voice; "I must be honest with you; I want to tell you something. I daresay you thought me cold and unfriendly the day we met at Awlford Junction; but I could not help it. I felt then as you will feel towards me, perhaps. I loved Gyneth Ralston then; I have always loved her from the first time I saw her."

Oliver looked at him as if he did not understand him.

"You love her! Then it is you! But what use is there in that?" he said, harshly—"you can't marry her. What have you to live on?" The tone pained Maurice, but he was resolute not to quarrel with his friend.

"I can't offer her the home you could have given her; I shall never be rich; but, if she listens to me, I could keep a wife in a year or so."

Oliver had risen and drawn himself up.

"My God, this is it, then! I am to understand that she has thrown me over for you." There was an intense scorn in his voice, but he spoke calmly.

"No, I have not said a word to her—don't make me regret that I spoke openly, Oliver; but I could not bear to seem even to take advantage of your confidence. Miss Ralston does not know that I love her—has perhaps never given me a second thought. I have not seen her since you spoke of your attachment. I have to begin even to try to win her, and it is quite possible that I shall fail; but I will be open and honest with you—I mean to try."

Oliver stood a minute or two struggling for self-control, then he turned away.

"You can't expect me to believe you," he said. "I see now what a fool you have made of me among the lot of you; only, for heaven's sake, don't talk about honesty, Penruddock; you and Martha have sickened me of honesty for the rest of my life."

Maurice felt that it was useless to justify himself.

"Good-bye, old friend," he said, kindly; "you are angry with me now, but you will see afterwards that I have acted unselfishly, and in good faith." He held out his hand; but Oliver shook his head, and drew himself up stiffly.

"No; the best thing you can do, Mr. Penruddock, is to forget that you ever called yourself my friend. Don't think of me in that light again; we can never have anything more in common."

All the old affection welled up in Maurice's heart; he was full of pity. For a moment he felt that he could give up his hope of Gyneth sooner than lose his friend.

"We can't part like this," he said, earnestly. "I don't want to argue, Oliver, but you must shake hands."

Oliver's answer was to put on his hat and walk out of the office.

CHAPTER XII

MARTHA'S LETTER.

THERE is a quality as often found in men as in women, though the latter seem to lay special claim to it—a quality to which it is difficult to give a name. It seems to serve humanly the purpose of those long, fairy-like appendages which give so much grace to the butterfly and many other flying creatures. Only that with human creatures this gift takes a spiritual rather than a material course; it does not merely warn the body of the approach of that which is either pleasant or hurtful, it claims a higher power, for it divines sometimes without any previous aid. Perhaps, after all, there is not a real likeness between its power and that of the antennæ,

for it often exists in minds with little perceptive faculty—minds, the owners of which will go into a house and will come out therefrom bringing away no distinct idea of the rooms or their decorations, or of the details of the dress of the inhabitants; they may even fail to take in the meaning of hints, or to draw conclusions therefrom, and yet they will be truly impressed by each character they meet, and if there be a secret lying hidden somewhere away, leaving no trace to indicate its whereabouts, they will discover it, although they may make no effort to draw it forth.

Mrs. Venables had this strange power of insight. Gyneth's confession had only confirmed that which her aunt had been reading in her ever since the girl's talk beside the river with Mr. Burridge; but she had read, she fancied, something yet more interesting, and she was not satisfied. She had gone very deep into Gyneth's heart, and she knew that indifference to Mr. Burridge was not the only reason why her niece had broken with him; but she trusted her fully; she felt sure that, if it

could be told, the girl would tell her secret, and if it could not be—well, then silence was far more womanly. Still it was hard to think that her own special darling, so full of love and of true feeling, should love in vain.

Gyneth sat looking at her aunt at breakfast-time while she read her letters.

"You are pining for uncle," she said; "your eyes are quite heavy, and you have not the shadow of a smile this morning. I am going to take you for a long walk, unless I can get something to drive you in. While you get ready I will go to my beloved post-office, which seems to be the Bemford emporium of information, and see what I can do."

Gyneth did not wish to go to the sea this morning, she so much feared to meet Oliver and his sister; she shrank from one almost as much as from the other to-day, and in this little sequestered peninsula the only possible drives were inland.

The morning was so full of sunshine that, before she emerged from the golden-flecked shade of the avenue, Gyneth had decided that the drive had better be put off till evening, she

felt sure that the mid-day heat would be too much for Mrs. Venables.

When she came in sight of the post-office, two ladies coming out stopped to speak to another going in.

"I should soon get to like this gossipy provincial life," Gyneth thought, "it is so entirely different from anything near London; the post-office seems to be the heart of this little village."

She went in, and while she waited she studied the face of Mrs. Owen, baker, grocer, stationer, and post-mistress, and wondered how many family secrets were known to that quiet, pale, flat-faced woman, with her alert, ferret-like, red eyes, and thin, pinched lips. But there was no alertness in Mrs. Owen's speech; her words seemed to fall out of her mouth in constant agreement with her customers, and her eyes this morning seemed to be chiding the lazy carelessness of her ringleted, sentimental-faced daughter, who appeared to find exertion quite too much for her, especially when presented through the medium of a customer. Her customer to-day was a servant, and the young lady behind the counter

felt herself wasted on anything so ordinary, so far below the heroines of the blue and silver transformation-scene fictions on which she largely fed.

Mrs. Owen's small red eyes saw the affronted face as well as her daughter's indifferent manner, and she was glad that Miss Ralston only wanted stamps, and that she could hurry to take her daughter's place. But Jane, for it was Martha's maid, was affronted beyond recall. She paid hastily for what she had bought, and turned so hurriedly to go out of the shop that she pushed against Gyneth in the narrow doorway. She curtsied and apologized; but as soon as they were both in the dusty road she said—

"Can I speak to you, if you please, ma'am?"

"How is Miss Burridge?" Miss Ralston asked.

"It's about that, ma'am. I thought perhaps you could tell me the best way of getting a doctor; there ain't one at all in this place."

"Is she so ill, then?"

"Well, miss, she looked very ill yesterday,

and soon after Mr. Oliver went away I went up and found her lying on the floor. I thought at first it was sleep; but, when she roused up, I saw fast enough what it was. It's weakness, that's what it is, and the doctor will give her something as would set her right."

"Then is Mr. Burridge gone?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am; he only stayed an hour or so, and that makes me anxious to get back. She's alone."

"I can't tell you about a doctor," said Gyneth; "we'll go in and ask Mrs. Owen,—you can then fetch one, and I will stay with Miss Burridge till you come back."

Jane looked troubled.

"You'll please not to say a word, ma'am, of what I've said. The postman never comes out to Foreland, and that old woman's so slow at bringing out letters, so I made the excuse by saying I'd go in and get the letters; perhaps you'll take this to Miss Martha, ma'am."

She gave Miss Ralston a letter, and Gyneth, having learned from Mrs. Owen that the doctor was usually summoned by means of the post-

man, left Jane to finish her housekeeping errands, and took her way across the fields to Foreland.

The purple clover-field was green now, and the butterflies had dispersed to seek other frolicking ground; they were abundant, however, among the rag-wort and thistle blossoms that stretched up a great height from the yellow cliff-side, to form a hedge beside the narrow path that, skirting the corn-fields, ran along the crumbling edge.

Gyneth was full of anxiety; she wished that she had gone home first to consult Mrs. Venables. She had never seen anyone faint, and Martha's illness seemed to her strange and unnatural.

But it was too late to turn back; already she could see the flagstaff at the point, and the inevitable coastguardsman with his telescope, watching over the sea.

As she was crossing the little bridge, she heard a murmur of childish voices.

"There's the lady!" and from the stones of the little stream below rose up a cluster of fair, curly heads, with sunburnt faces attached, bent

on seeing the lady. Then, as she nodded and smiled, they melted out of sight, some under the bridge, some hiding all but their bare legs in the tangle of wild plants that bordered the little stream.

"Ah, ye young varmints, get out of that!" said Mrs. Jones, who was standing in the road holding her chin with one hand, her white stockings showing broadly through the opening of her unlaced boots. "Good morning to you, ma'am."

Mrs. Jones had a keen eye to business, and she thought a great deal more of this sweet-looking lady, who she heard belonged to the folks as had brought down a London footman, than of her tall, pale lodger, who seemed to have no change of gowns to speak of, but dressed every day pretty much the same.

Gyneth nodded and went on, but inside the gate she stopped to breathe the perfume which surrounded her; these last sunshiny days had opened the starry myrtle blossoms more fully, their soft tasselled loveliness glowed in the brilliant light, and their fragrance, mingled with that of the high bay-hedge which divided the garden

from the road, was exquisite. But the sight of the myrtles enchanted Gyneth; she had never seen southern vegetation, and her delight at the huge bushes, white with tasselled blossoms and the rich red of the fuschias climbing so as to reach the cottage eaves, was unbounded. She was just going in, when she saw Martha sitting out in front of the cottage.

She looked terribly ill, Gyneth thought, and so very sad and hopeless, but Martha smiled when she saw who her visitor was—just for a moment; then she remembered Oliver's anger, and she grew grave again.

"You don't look well," Gyneth said. "I am afraid you are not careful of your health."

"I am not well," Martha said, gravely; "but I saw my brother when he came; he is dreadfully unhappy, and I believe I have been grieving for him, poor fellow." She stopped and looked in her companion's blushing face. "I still believe you have done quite the best thing you could do, Miss Ralston; but you cannot guess how he loved you."

Gyneth sighed; she did not know how to

answer. It seemed useless to go over this miserable subject again, and she could not think that Martha wished it. Just then she remembered the letter, and she gave it to Miss Burridge.

"I met Jane at the post-office," she said, "and she asked me to give you this, as she had more shopping to do in the village."

Gyneth had scarcely noticed the address, but at sight of it such a glow came to Martha's pale cheeks that she felt her attention roused; then, ashamed of her curiosity, she turned away and looked over the sea.

When she turned round, Miss Burridge looked transformed; she had begun her letter, and was reading it eagerly. Her eyes were full of colour now; it seemed as if some enchantment had passed over her, she looked so much younger and so very handsome, Gyneth thought; while she stood, wrapt in admiration, Martha suddenly looked up.

"I beg your pardon,"—she crumpled her letter into her pocket—"but I have got good news in my letter, and I was so sad before that

the pleasure made me forgetful. Will you not sit down?—you must be tired after your long walk." She went on, with an animation that surprised Gyneth. "I think it is so very kind of you to come out so far to see me, for I have nothing to offer in return."

"You are very obstinate," said Gyneth, affectionately. "You seem as if you could not believe in friendship."

Martha softened as she looked at the sweet face.

"I have had so little," she said. "Do you know that you are the first girl that ever cared for me?"

"But"—Gyneth felt shy and inquisitive at once—"you have had friends some time or other? I have never had a girl friend either; but I had my mother, and then my aunt and my sister—one must cling to some one;" then she thought of Oliver, and stopped, for she did not want to speak of him.

Martha sat still; her eyes had gone back to their dreamy expression, and were gazing out over the sea; but she did not look sad, her

hands lay quietly in her lap. It seemed to Gyneth that the feverish, restless spirit which had possessed her new acquaintance had been charmed to sleep.

"I had my mother,"—Martha spoke slowly, and without looking round—"but she married late; I can never remember her young; she was always old and blind. I loved her dearly; but I could not have troubled her with my thoughts and fancies. I don't think girls ever tell their mothers such things, Miss Ralston."

"Don't they?" Gyneth sighed, and began to wonder whether she had been selfish in sharing all the perplexities of her young mind with the sweet mother gone to her rest.

Martha went on as if she had not spoken, and her companion grew more and more surprised at the change that seemed to have been worked in her friend. Martha's cynical, almost bitter withdrawal of herself from confidence and sympathy was gone. A slight flush flickered into her cheeks as she went on speaking quickly, and her eyes grew suffused and dark, though she kept them turned away from Gyneth.

"I had Oliver too; but I think I was more use to him than he was to me; he would have had no time to listen to my troubles. It seems to me that that is the chief part of a woman's work in the world, Miss Ralston. She has to listen to men, and help them to bear their troubles."

Gyneth sighed. How petted and cared for and sympathized with her life had been, compared with this sorrowful, shut-up Martha!

"I think you spoilt your brother, perhaps," and then she grew rosy at having blamed Oliver. "I can fancy a man helping a woman's perplexities by the light of his greater knowledge of life."

The flush spread over Martha's face, the dreaminess fled out of her eyes, and a warm glow lightened in them.

"Yes," she said, "a man whose nature is godlike, who will stoop in every way to his friend's level and yet never feel that he condescends, whose sympathy is so perfect that he knows every thought before it is spoken, who anticipates every wish, and never leaves any sore or mortified feeling when he goes away." She

stopped suddenly, and gave a furtive look at Gyneth. The deep interest in the girl's face checked Martha's flow of confidence.

"You are drawing on your imagination," Gyneth said. "I can't fancy any man as unselfish as all that. I think I like men to be a little selfish."

"Oh, no,"—Martha spoke quickly. "A true man could never be selfish; his nature is too large. Look how unselfish Oliver is!" then she paused, feeling that Miss Ralston must shrink from discussing her brother. "But," she went on, quickly, "unselfishness has different ways of showing itself. The friend I was speaking of seems to have an almost womanish power of sympathy, though he is man-like in his power of reticence."

Gyneth's interest had become an almost painful suspense. Martha seemed unconscious that she had slipped from the possible into the positive, and her companion feared to speak lest she should go back into her reserve, and yet Gyneth felt that it was disloyal in any way to surprise this confidence, in which something

whispered she was herself so deeply interested.

"Are you speaking of an old friend?" she said, gently.

Martha started out of her reverie; she looked inquiringly at Gyneth, but the girl avoided her gaze. All at once it seemed as if Martha was as far away from any possible intimacy as she had been when first she saw her. Martha went on—

"Yes, and the best friend we ever had. We knew him when we were young; we grew up together for a time, and then drifted apart; but we never forgot one another." Then she said, in her usual abrupt way—"But this cannot interest you; I beg your pardon."

"I am very much interested," Gyneth said, gravely, "and I should like to hear all you are inclined to tell me. Was the letter I brought you from your—your friend?"—with an emphasis.

Martha's cheeks flushed till she looked beautiful, her heavy eyelids drooped; but Gyneth could see a soft, happy light in the eyes, shining through their golden veil of lashes.

"Yes; but why do you ask?" Martha spoke

uneasily; it seemed to her that she had been talking nonsense, or Gyneth could not have arrived at this guess.

"Oh! I am a witch sometimes. You looked so ill and sad when I came in, and since you read the letter you have been bright, and you seem better."

Martha grew pale as Gyneth spoke, and the sad look came back.

"I see what you think, Miss Ralston; but you are wrong—quite wrong."

She rose up from the bench and began to walk up and down the narrow, gravelled path, for some time in perfect silence. Then all at once she stopped, and Gyneth noticed that she was twining her fingers together in the old shy, perplexed fashion.

"How hard life is to understand!—I cannot understand it—people, I mean. I wonder if anyone can. Things that are the same in themselves are so differently seen and judged of by different people that it is almost as if one person saw wrong side out."

"Do you mean that you and I see things differently?"

Martha bent her head, then she went on—

"I had begun to think we agreed. I suppose it is like this: feelings may be the same, but they gather strength from repression. One person has happiness and joy all life through—warm feelings are always bubbling up to the surface, and so they gradually waste—but where a woman has known no joy, not one happiness entirely her own in life, do you think she could keep within bounds if such a joy came to her—if she had hungered for it, so longed for it that she felt, were it but hers, she could gladly die the next minute?—could she, do you think, receive it, or any part of it, as tamely as if it were a matter of course? No."

She seemed to dilate as she stood there in her pale washed-out gown, her rich hair glowing like a glory round her head, while the strip of green meadow, and then the blue beyond it, made a background for the grand outlines of her figure.

Gyneth smiled sadly; how pale and chill her feelings seemed beside Martha's!

"You see you were right when we sat on the

stones"—she looked towards the beach;—"I know nothing about love."

Martha flushed quickly.

"One may imagine without feeling," she said; "you seemed to be mistaking friendship for love just now, and I say there can be no mistake between them."

"I suppose not." Then, with a timid look at Martha—"I used to think that love revealed its power by degrees, and that a woman might really love without knowing at all that she loved; but I suppose I was wrong. Some people have much greater powers of loving than others have, and they must have a stronger power of winning love in return."

"Do you think so?" Martha asked, eagerly—"do you really think so? I wish I could think that. No, Miss Ralston, it seems to me that those women win the deepest love who give none in return." Then, after hesitating, she said—"Surely you cannot say No to that."

Gyneth sighed.

"I must be going," she said. "I am so very glad to find you so much better than I expect-

ed; I wish you would come up and lunch one day with us. My uncle and Louisa will be away a few days longer."

"You are very kind." Then she said, awkwardly, "I may be—I believe I am—engaged to-morrow, and perhaps longer; but I will call on you the next time I come to Bemford."

CHAPTER XIII.

MAURICE AT FORELAND.

FOR the first time in her life, Jane wished for a fellow-servant; at Fulham she had flatly refused permanent assistance, though she had graciously permitted the services of an old woman, who, having lost her teeth, and being, moreover, deaf, could not offend Jane's ears with the gossip which she stoutly maintained would take up half the time of any house-maid engaged by Mr. Oliver. But to-day there had pierced into Jane's rather dull brain a ray of light which had widened into the shape of a fact—a fact which once before, since their arrival at Bemford, had suggested itself, but which she had since then overlooked in her interest about Mr. Oliver's young lady, and lately in

her anxiety about her mistress's health—Miss Martha was in love; nothing else would account for the magic wrought by a letter; and there was no one to tell it to, no one on whom to vent the perplexity that possessed the handmaiden. For Jane had taken a step which, now that she stood once more on her own kitchen floor, among her plates and saucepans and jugs, seemed extremely rash, though yesterday, while she was in the post-office, and had Miss Ralston's encouragement fresh in her ears, she had felt a glow of pleasure at her own forethought; and now the doctor would come in the course of the day, and find Miss Martha quite well.

Jane was obliged to confess to herself that she had not seen her mistress look so well since she went with Mr. Oliver to Awlford, and she had not been left in doubt about the cause of this sudden transformation. When she came in with Miss Martha's tea—and as she told her dresser full of plates, for she had nothing else to confide in—she had nearly let the tray drop in surprise at the change in Miss Burridge's looks.

"Mr. Penruddock is coming to-morrow, Jane," Miss Burridge said, cheerfully, "so you must get a nice dinner—that letter was from him."

"And she looks better still to-day, more like twenty than she did at twenty," said the aggrieved woman, "and she moves about as briskly as a bee. My word, what will the doctor say? For twopence I'd fall ill myself, and say I was the patient, only then I should have to pay. I must say something before he comes. My gracious! what a fuss there'll be!"

But the morning passed away without any sound of the doctor's carriage-wheels, and Jane decided that till she heard them she would "let well alone."

Martha had been very restless all the morning, and now she stood in her little bed-room, smiling at her own vanity. The ceiling was very low, and so was the dressing-table, and she had to raise the looking-glass and hold it at arm's length, so as to get any idea of her own appearance. For the first time since she reached Bemford, she had taken pains with her dress, and had put on a new white gown, which

Oliver had chosen for her at a fashionable London shop. It suited her wonderfully, and her crown of ruddy gold gleamed with yet fuller colour; her eyes looked almost black with excitement, and a delicate colour bloomed on her fair skin. She set down the glass with a smile, half ashamed, half pleased.

"Oliver is always glad when I look nice," she said. Then she recognized her hypocrisy, and, frowning, turned away and sighed. She thought of that first time of expectation at Fulham, when Oliver brought Maurice to see her; it seemed years ago. How ignorant she had been then, and how uncouth Maurice must have thought all her arrangements. Those weeks of association at Awlford had insensibly altered Martha, and broken down some of her rigid, narrow notions. To-day she had been out in the garden gathering flowers to deck her rooms, and she wore at her throat a sprig of myrtle-blossom; but for shame at her own vanity she would have put a bit in her hair.

"Green and white, forsaken quite," Jane said to herself, as Martha passed the kitchen-window

on her way to the gate. "But, my word, I didn't know she could look so well; he ought to be proud of her."

Jane had not much opinion of Mr. Penruddock. She thought him "too quiet, nothing to compare with Mr. Oliver for looks, nor nothing besides." But, as Jane had never been in love, she thought such a feeling in another woman an undoubted sign of weakness and folly, and, therefore, supposed that Mr. Penruddock would do for the purpose as well as anyone else.

Martha had heard footsteps so far off, it seemed to her that she had felt Maurice's approach ever since he left London. She was, therefore, perfectly collected to outward appearance as she went down to the gate, but her eyes felt burning, and her hands were cold as death, and she shivered while she stood in the sunshine.

"Is it real?" she asked herself, with a timid smile. "Can he be coming?"

She neither hoped nor thought that this visit would establish other relations between them; but she should see him, he was coming to see

her; that was the burden of her thoughts, the low-voiced song they kept on singing. She was too full of joy to think about herself, or she might have noticed that there was no future in this happiness, not a step beyond the one fact that she should see Maurice.

She sees him, though she is hidden at present by the tall bay-hedge. He stands on the little stone bridge smiling down into the face of one of the golden-haired children of whom he has been asking his way, her own special pet, Jack. Martha's first impulse is to run away, and then she goes forward and opens the gate. At the sound of the click Maurice looks across the road, his bright smile warming her heart. He smiles and nods, and now they are shaking hands, and Martha rouses into actual life.

"What a charming place you have," he says, walking beside her with the tangled shrubbery on each side. "A sort of charmed bower;" then he added, with a mischievous look, "quiet enough even to please you."

"Yes, it is very quiet."

"The air suits you at least," he said, affec-

tionately. "I never saw you look better." Martha blushed with pleasure, but she looked away from him, and Maurice, remembering her shyness, began to speak of his journey.

"Have you lunched?" she said. "We will have dinner at six. I thought you would stay," she said, timidly.

"Thank you. I have ordered a bed at the little inn in the village, but I will dine with you gladly as you so kindly ask me. I want to know how you have been all this while. Shall we sit on this bench here; this is really a charming place, far better than the village; Oliver did not stay long, I suppose."

Martha's face clouded. She told him the details of Oliver's visit, and her conviction that Miss Ralston had acted rightly. "They were not suited," she said, simply.

"I do not think they were," Maurice answered, and then he stopped. He did not want to discuss Miss Ralston.

"Poor fellow! he has cared for her so long," Martha said, "long before his illness I knew he loved her. He could not help it."

"No. I understand your feeling," he smiled. "I don't suppose you would ever think anyone good enough for Oliver."

"I don't think it was that." Such a sweet soothing had spread over Martha—she was able to answer without a trace of harshness—it was delicious to be really beside Maurice, and, even when she did not look at him, to listen to his deep-toned, gentle voice. A warm glow was spreading through her senses, lulling disquiet and unbelief to sleep.

Maurice smiled at her in the fond, half-teazing way he had with Martha. She always saw him at his best; he was so sure of her affection and sympathy, and to-day she seemed to him perfect.

"Well, I don't know; when I remember Deeping, I sometimes think the girl is yet to be found good enough in your eyes to be Mrs. Oliver."

Martha blushed as he spoke of Deeping. She was thinking of that evening in the wood, and of many happy hours—how little she had then known their value.

"You mean I spoiled him." Maurice smiled, and she went on, "I do not say that Miss Ralston is not good enough. She is"—Martha raised her head proudly—"in some ways what people would call too good. I mean she has more refinement than perhaps Oliver's wife needs to have. I could see easily that this quality is special to Miss Ralston—her sister, who looks more fashionable, is far more common-place."

Maurice smiled. "How observing you are," he said. She felt that he was praising her.

"That is all I can do," she smiled. "I talk so little to strangers, so I can't help observing; but in one way Miss Ralston is not good enough for Oliver. She cannot love as he can."

"She does not love him, you mean, but she may have the power of loving."

Martha shook her head.

"Do you think all women can love equally?" She looked away from him over the sea, her beating heart warned her that she was losing self-control, it was not safe to discuss love with her companion.

"No, of course not. Some women—some-

times those who seem the most charming—are either cold or self-centred; either they can't let affection go out from them in the generous, spontaneous fashion of true love, or they never feel it; but then remember the question of temperament comes in here, and I hardly think Miss Ralston seems cold."

There was question in his voice, and Martha gave him a rapid glance.

"What do you mean by that?" she said. Maurice was not looking at her, and disquiet rose again in her soothed soul. "Do you want to know what I think of Miss Ralston, or do you mean that I have no right to judge of her powers of loving? Perhaps you don't consider Oliver capable of inspiring love."

Penruddock answered, hurriedly,

"How could I think so? Why, Oliver is my best friend—about the best and noblest fellow I know. I feel half angry with you for saying such a thing. Oliver is sure to be loved by some woman, but it will be—at least, I fancy so—by a franker, more courageous nature than Miss Ralston's."

Martha shook her head.

"You don't understand him; he likes women to be quiet and timid, he does not mind if they are shy even, so long as"—the colour came brightly into her face—"as they are not awkward, and unlike others."

Maurice winced as she spoke; he wished Martha would not cherish these morbid feelings, it seemed to him that she was superior to almost any woman he had ever known, and to-day he had been greatly impressed by the softened change in her manner, and the ease that seemed to have come to her.

"A man who has lived with you would necessarily be hard to please," he said, so gravely that she could not think he meant to flatter her, and again a thrill of warm, intoxicating pleasure stole through Martha's being. "I know well that Oliver would never care for any ordinary girl, full of vanity, and dress, and petty ideas. I fancy one of these modern originals, full of lofty aims, would suit him, even if her mind were a trifle unregulated; he has judgment and ballast enough for himself and another."

"Then"—Martha spoke slowly, and she fixed her dark, glowing eyes earnestly on his—"you are not anxious to know what I think of Miss Ralston?"

He got up and looked across towards Bemford.

"Not to-day," he said. "I want to know more about Oliver, for our meeting was very, very hurried, and he gave me only the bare facts about Awlford also." He sat down again, and smiled at her with such affectionate, honest eyes that the dim doubt which had stirred so uneasily a minute ago was lulled in Martha's heart. "You have not told me how you really are," he went on; "your looks don't tell truth always—I learned that at Awlford. How much longer do you mean to stay here?"

She answered him, and then she told him all she knew about Oliver's success; and he began to talk of Deeping and his own life since then in an easy flow of confidence which would very much have surprised Lady Mary Penruddock; but, indeed, the whole proceeding would have seemed to her very surprising indeed. Martha

was not troubled by scruples of "what would the world say;" she forgot everything except that Maurice sat beside her talking with a loving confidence that even Oliver rarely showed her now.

CHAPTER XIV.

OVERCAST.

MARTHA is still in the garden, but she is alone; she has come back from the gate, and she sits just where she sat with Maurice, her hands clasped in her lap, and a look of delight in her face. There is no one there to see, but such delight has rarely, if ever, been hers. Maurice has been talking with her all this long while, and now he has left her with a promise to come back at six. Martha looks at her watch, and feels that the time will be long to get through—it is not much after three now. She has ordered the dinner, and she knows that Jane prefers to be left unaided; she has nothing to do; she may sit here and dream over all that

Maurice has been saying. Her eyes are fixed on the sky, but it is so blue, and the few clouds are so very still, that her gazing does not disturb her; soon a sea-gull flies high across the blue, and her eyes follow it. Martha wonders where it has its nest, and what will become of the young birds if their parent is killed by some of the cruel tourists who pop at the gulls when they feel safe from observation. She watches the white wings flying towards Bemford, and then a sudden darkness seems to overspread the sky. What is it? The girl shivers, as if a chill wind blew across the narrow flower-border that separates her from the green strip of meadow. The sky is as bright as ever, the air as warm, but she looks more and more disturbed; she gets up and walks up and down; then hurriedly, as if forced on by some impulse beyond her government, she goes into the cottage, and snatching at the hat that hangs just within the door, she puts it on and hastens down to the gate.

There would be no use in asking her what she is about; she could only answer she is go-

ing to Bemford. Maurice asked her if he could get there along the sands, and she knows that by hurrying across the fields she can reach the avenue before he will. She cannot tell even herself the reason why, but it has come to her suddenly that she must know where Maurice is going.

She told him without his asking that Miss Ralston and her family lived in the avenue, but he seemed to pay no attention then, only, as he turned away from the gate, he said,

"I think the avenue goes down to the edge of the cliff, does it not?"

And she had said "yes," and then, lapped in a passion of happiness, had gone back into the garden to dream over what had been happening. Her thoughts had flown back at once to the beginning of this delicious meeting; every word, every look was heard and seen again, till the gull's flight drew her from her dream, and then some evil memory called up those words long before their turn had come in the order of her retrospect.

"Is it possible," she thought, as she hurried

along, "that he has left me, in the midst of an interesting talk, to go and see Miss Ralston, a girl he hardly knows, and about whom he has shown so little interest? Surely he came down to Bemford to see me, he will give me all this first afternoon; to-morrow will do for a call of mere acquaintance."

Martha tried to smile, but that strange light which had burned in her eyes long ago, when Oliver spoke of Gyneth Ralston, was as fierce as ever.

But she had not calculated her strength; when she reached the last stile before entering the village she was obliged to rest, for she was faint and giddy. Two elm-trees in the lane beyond made a pleasant shade over her head. Grasshoppers chirped their incessant click click among the golden barley, and far beyond, over the waving plain of bent ears, she could see the line of blue sea. From the hedge on her left came a sweet honeysuckle perfume, the flowers were on the other side, she could not see them, but still the hedge itself was gay with satin-leaved, scarlet-berried briony, and clinging vines of large white bind-

weed; while its cousin, the rosy "way-wind," clothed the feet of the hedge itself, little golden stars gemming its prostrate wreaths.

Martha felt soothed as she looked and listened, for gnats were having a concert near her, and a lark, high overhead, was singing out his never-tired notes.

She crossed the stile, and took her way along the lane with a calmer face. She was asking asking herself why she shrank from Gyneth Ralston, why she had always shrank from her, from the evening when they stood so near one another beside the river at Fulham—so near, but then so far apart. Afterwards, when Gyneth had come to see her, she had been conscious of a struggle between fascination and repulsion.

"And this has gone on," she said to herself. "There was a look in her face when last we talked together that raked up my old dislike. I can't tell what it is. I thought it was because of Oliver, but that can't be now."

She shrank into herself. This feeling shocked her, and puzzled her too. It seemed to come to her from without. Martha, in her varied reading,

had come upon an old book on "demoniac possession," and she could almost have fancied, while she sat under the tree gazing out over the sweet nature before her, that some evil spirit lurked in the leaves, and whispered a terrible suggestion. She had repelled it; she had gazed out on sea and sky, and tried to listen to the birds' song of praise; but now, as she went along the lane, and reached the corner where it crossed the avenue, the whisper came again: Did Gyneth Ralston love Maurice, and was it for him that she had refused Oliver?

Martha's calmness fled. She leaned against a tree in the angle of the hedge, just where she could see over it into the avenue without being seen herself by anyone coming up from the cliff. The hot blood seemed to mount to her brain, and, for a moment, made her sight misty.

"Oh, not that, not that," she thought, wildly. "He does not love her. I know he does not." She paused, and then her face grew hard and set. "And she shall not win him to love her," she thought.

And then Gyneth's charming face, the grace

and sweetness of her manner, rose before Martha. She pictured Maurice gazing at this fair vision, and she felt crushed, almost lifeless; for a time all outward surroundings lost shape and meaning. Then as sense returned, the blood rushing through her veins seemed to be on fire. She hated Gyneth with an intensity that, had she seen the girl beside her, might have led her to some mad action. All at once a veil seemed to lift, the mystery revealed itself. Was this the secret of her strange feelings towards Miss Ralston? and then came another pause of thought: had she had an unconscious warning all this time? The strength of Martha's will made itself felt through the blinding storm of jealousy. Her thoughts detached themselves from Gyneth, so that she might reflect how the danger was to be averted. She resolved that this girl should not step in with her hypocritical, gentle ways, and take for herself all that Martha had coveted, all that she lived for.

She put her hand up to her forehead. Something within her strove to be heard, but her mind was too rudely shaken for any voice to be

audible in the chaos which passion had produced. Only one idea loomed out in distinct and gloomy shape: Gyneth Ralston must not be permitted to win the love of Maurice. The means of prevention had yet to be found.

"His love! Good God! have I ever dared to think I could win his love? All I ask, all I hope for, is the affection he now shows me, the dear joy of feeling that he is happy with me, and that I possess his confidence. I could not hope for more than this, but then I could not lose it, and I must lose it if he loves another woman; he is made to be worshipped, not to be fretted and worried by the petty cares of common life. He can never do wrong. If I might only serve him and wait on him all my life, he should never know how I loved him. I only want to see him oftener, and have always the happiness I feel with him now."

This thought of Maurice soothes her. She has called up a vision of his face, gently smiling at her, with that half sweet, half mischievous look, so entwined with the memory of her girlish love, and she comes almost to herself. She does not go

into the avenue. She stands—it seems to two little girls who pass by hand in hand—listening to the hum of the bees in the garden behind the hedge. Presently her head sinks down on her breast, a vivid blush rises on her pale face, and mounts to her forehead, and her eyes droop with painful shame as she turns back into the lane again.

What is she doing there?—of what meanness has she been capable? She has only just escaped playing spy on her dear love—her love, her idol, and just now she said that he merited such implicit trust.

So, long before Maurice reaches the avenue, for the way is so much longer beside the sea, Martha has crossed the stile where she sat beside the barley, and is speeding home again, torn with shame and anger against herself.

CHAPTER XV.

MAURICE'S WOOING.

THE dreamy happiness which had soothed and enwrapped Martha during Maurice's visit had been shared by him. His strong power of reticence, founded not so much on that reserve of pride which disdains to betray emotion, and which foreigners declare to be one of the most decided characteristics of our countrymen, but on a sweetness of nature, an absence of self-love, that instinctively put itself last in all things, had always made him silent about his feelings. He never spoke voluntarily of himself, and Martha was right in thinking that she had had more of his confidence than anyone else had. Really he talked more freely to her than to anyone, partly

from affection, partly because he thought the best way of conquering the shyness from which she so evidently suffered was to set her the example of a frank outspokenness. It would have been a natural carrying out both of his affection and his friendship to Martha if to-day he had poured out to her his hopes and fears about Gyneth. The thought of Oliver had kept him silent, his good taste shrank from a subject which must at least bring his possible success in sharp contrast with Oliver's failure, and his utter want of self-conceit made him unwilling to discuss such purely personal feelings. As he went along beside the sea, stooping now and then to pick up and to marvel at the colour of the little yellow or orange shells that showed plentifully on the tawny sand or among the shingle, he thought that, if Miss Ralston's manner gave him hope, he would tell Martha this evening, but if not, then she need never know that he had wished to rival Oliver.

He had the hope which true love gives a man —the belief that his very truth must tell favourably, but Maurice had not much self-confidence, and when he remembered that Miss Ralston had

travelled, and had seen a good deal of society, both at home and abroad, he feared that he might be too late in his effort to win her—that she had already seen some man whom she preferred to Oliver.

He had an artist temperament, he received impressions vividly, and ripened them slowly, and, as self-consciousness was foreign to his nature, so also was a habit of self-contemplation. The germ of love had entered at once into his heart at the first sight of Gyneth, but he had not been aware of the extent of its possession until he learned Oliver's attachment, then the veil fell, and he saw that what he had taken for a decided fascination was a far deeper feeling. He did not go again to The Elms, but he had yet to learn the passionate side of his attachment, and this further awakening came when Lady Mary told him of his friend's engagement.

Since then Maurice hardly knew how life had gone with him. In his present reaction of hope he looked back with some shame to the dogged obstinacy with which he had stayed in town, refusing so many friends who had counted on

visits from him at their country houses; he knew that he had lived like a hermit at his chambers and his club because he felt too sulky and out of tune to go among people to whom he must have behaved in his ordinary fashion. And now, it was as if some spell had broken; the tide of hope came in so strongly that he could hardly listen to the doubts which came in with it—he would not think of Oliver in these moments of blissful looking forward.

The beauty of the scene, the romantic lights and shadows of that picturesque upward climb through the pine-trees, seemed in harmony with his state. But, when he reached the avenue, the longing to end suspense had conquered all other sensations, and he hurried on till he stood under the porch of Mr. Venables' house.

It was a relief to be told that only Mrs. Venables and Miss Ralston were at home. They had not heard his arrival, and Mrs. Venables roused as if from a nap, and Miss Ralston got up from the easel, where she sat drawing, with a certain amount of embarrassment very unlike her usual smiling grace of manner.

"Mr. Venables will be so sorry to have missed you," his wife said; "but perhaps you are staying here—we expect him home soon."

"I am not sure how long I shall stay," Maurice said, and he looked at Gyneth. She had conquered her embarrassment by an effort of will, and now she felt flurried and full of excitement.

"Don't you think the place charming?" She caught eagerly at the first thing, at something to say; for though she felt as if she must speak, she had nothing ready to talk about.

"Yes, from what I have seen."

"You know that Miss Burridge is here," said Mrs. Venables.

"Yes, I have been to Foreland. What a charming cottage she has!"

He looked at Gyneth, and met those sweet dark eyes fixed on his with singular observation. Gyneth flushed and withdrew her gaze. She had noticed that Mr. Penruddock spoke of Martha without any change of expression.

"It is delightful, so wild and quaint," she said, hurriedly, and she pointed to a nosegay on the

table; "those flowers came from the garden. I am so anxious for my aunt to see the myrtles at Foreland—they are the finest I have seen here."

"How is Miss Burridge to-day?" said Mrs. Venables. "My niece has been anxious about her lately."

"I am sure your visit will have done her good," the girl said, looking steadily at him. "She wants rousing; she seems to have fits of depression—and she is very lonely here."

"She has you, and I fancy you are a more lively companion than I am."

Something in his smile brought a glow to her heart. She shook her head.

"Oh, yes, I try to amuse her, but I am only a new acquaintance. I cannot compare myself with such an old friend as you are. I believe you have been friends from the cradle upwards —tottered into life together," she said, saucily.

Maurice smiled too.

"Not quite that," his manner was franker than Gyneth had thought it could be, "but Martha Burridge and I are very old friends.

I have never had a sister, and she takes just the place in my life that a sister would take, I suppose, if I saw her frequently, but we do not often meet."

He said this unconsciously, but Mrs. Venables gave him a keen glance. It seemed to her that he was distinctly disclaiming any special attachment to Miss Burridge. Gyneth was all at once strangely shy and dumb; she appeared to have no words ready. Mrs. Venables watched her without even turning her head; these two must surely understand one another, she thought; she exerted herself to answer Maurice.

"There is nothing pleasanter," she said, "than meeting a really dear friend after a long separation—don't you think so?"

"Well, I hardly know,"—he was looking at Gyneth. "The mere affectionate feeling is, of course, very delightful, but I think one has so much to hear and to tell that one rarely says what one counted on saying; one's thoughts, I suppose, don't get free easily when they have been kept prisoners for a time. But then"—he smiled, and Mrs. Venables thought how winning

his expression was—"I am always a very silent person, and slow at expressing my ideas."

"I suppose," said Mrs. Venables, "that what you say applies to everything in life; everything seems better in anticipation."

"But then, aunt," Gyneth's interest and excitement hurried her into words now that there was something to talk about, "surely some people are quite different from others; there are people who always anticipate evil, and seem quite surprised when good comes instead. But I fancy happiness—real happiness, I mean—must always be as good as one expects it to be."

She did not look at either of her companions as she spoke, but Maurice regarded her with keen inquiry, he wondered whether she had some special coveted happiness in her thoughts.

"Remember, Miss Ralston, what you said just now about the difference in people; I fancy an exacting nature will not even be content with the measure of happiness which seems overflowing to a meeker, more loving spirit."

Gyneth sighed. She felt that hers must be a

very exacting nature; but her aunt was silent, so she answered Maurice.

"But then discontent is a part of the nature of English people; they only fulfil their being by grumbling; the rarest thing in the world is a contented person."

Maurice laughed.

"I don't know," he said; "I fancy a great many common-place people go on for a long time perfectly content with themselves and with all that happens to them, nothing can ruffle their self-complacency. I am not sure that a little of what you call discontent is not necessary to this educing of excellence."

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Venables. "It must be right; it is the butterfly part of us; without it we might remain materialists, chained to earth and mere earthly happiness."

"Very well, aunt," said Gyneth, brightly, "if that is your decision, I shall take to grumbling, and remember that, if I do, I shall only be carrying out your precepts."

There was so much gay sparkle in her

manner that Maurice's eyes were full of admiration.

"Not much fear of that, I think," and as he spoke his eyes met Gyneth's fully. Hers fell at once, but she did not look vexed, and yet Maurice was conscious that he had let his feelings show themselves. A flush stole into the girl's face, but she looked sweeter than ever.

Mrs. Venables went to the other end of the room, and began to search in a folio for some photographs of Bemford; it was the first time Maurice had ever been alone with Gyneth, and he felt moved out of his usual reserve; he would find out whether he might hope.

"Do you go down to the sea in the morning?" he said.

"Yes, very often, and I go that way to see Miss Burridge; I like walking beside the sea." She felt a morbid longing to bring the talk back to Martha. "I am afraid she is not really better for having come down here."

"Well, I don't know," Maurice spoke carelessly; he was vexed with Gyneth for wasting their little *tête-à-tête* in talking about Martha,

"she surprised me by looking so well, and she seemed in good spirits; I am going back to dine with her, can I give a message from you?"

Their eyes met again, and Gyneth could not misunderstand the earnest feeling in his. She felt troubled, and she answered, with some confusion,

"Oh, thank you; you can give my love, she will not want my visits now that she has such a much older friend to talk to."

Maurice smiled, but he did not look at all conscious. "I shall not be at Foreland all day," he said, "so I hope you will go and see her soon; she lives too much alone; I am sure you must do her good."

"I don't know that; I enjoy seeing her, her talk is so different from other people's," and then Gyneth smiled, and shot a swift, observing glance at Mr. Penruddock; "I like looking at her," she went on, "she is so handsome, and I am a passionate lover of beauty."

"Are you?" He kept his eyes fixed on her glowing face. "Yes, Miss Burridge is very handsome; she would make a good picture for

an artist, and it is not every beautiful face that would do this."

Mrs. Venables was still busy with her portfolio. Maurice was puzzled by Gyneth's changes of manner; she had seemed at first so full of graceful ease and brightness, but now she was confused and embarrassed.

He began to fear that after all she disliked him. He came nearer, so that he could see the picture on her easel.

"May I look at it?" he said.

It was a rich study of sea seen through the pine-trees, with a luxuriant foreground of the flowery tangle he had seen on the cliff.

"Surely it is very good," he said. "I am not a critic, but this seems to me so life-like, and the colour is so good."

Gyneth sighed.

"You are kind to say it, but when you have seen this view as often as I have you will do more justice to its beauty; it seems to me to be a skeleton, exact, perhaps, but wanting life and colour. Each time I go to the cliff the scene looks more lovely. How pitiful it is that

one can never realize the pictures that paint themselves on one's brain."

She sat looking at her drawing with discontented eyes. Maurice was watching her. It was charming to see how rapidly one expression chased another on the sweet delicate features; he thought that no one could ever paint a portrait of Gyneth, there was such an infinite variety of expression in her face. He quite forgot how long he had been silently gazing. When Mrs. Venables came back with her photographs, Penruddock and Gyneth each started. They had both been dreaming of one another.

Mrs. Venables understood, but she looked pleasantly unconscious.

"This is the same view,"—she glanced at Gyneth's drawing, as she held out a photograph to Mr. Penruddock—"only it is taken higher up. There is less sea, and more of the mysterious light and shade of the wood."

Maurice looked at it carefully.

"I believe," he said, "I hurried up the path so rapidly that I quite overlooked its beauty.

You see I am only just arrived, but as I go back I will look out for these two points."

"There is a shorter way across the fields, and then along the top of the cliff through the corn-fields; it is so exquisite," said Gyneth, enthusiastically, "to see the golden corn waving against a background of sea."

Maurice shook his head.

"I had better keep to the road I know. I am not at all clever at finding my way in a new country."

Mrs. Venables smiled.

"I wonder if you and Miss Burridge will care to drive with us to-morrow," she said. "My niece has succeeded in finding a little carriage, and she is going to drive me as near as possible to the huge white cliff that ends the bay beyond Foreland. There is no carriage road to the cliff itself, but you can reach either the top or the beach below by a foot-path."

"Thank you very much." Maurice's eyes brightened, and he spoke eagerly. "I will give your message to Miss Burridge; I shall

be delighted to go with you in any case." He looked hard at Gyneth, but she would not meet his eyes. She was smiling, but there was no special delight in her face—nothing on which he could build hopes.

He knew that he had been paying an unconscionably long visit, but still he lingered, listening to Mrs. Venables' bright, gentle talk, and keeping a watch on Gyneth's face. Every now and then the girl joined in with some lively nonsense that showed she had quite recovered herself. She was almost flippant when, at length, he said good-bye.

"Take care not to lose your way as you go to Foreland," she said. "You might get carried out by the tide."

And Maurice departed slowly and reluctantly. Yes, he had not deceived himself about his own feelings. He felt as uncertain as ever about what Gyneth Ralston felt for him, but he knew that he could have no peace till he had satisfied himself; he must tell her he loved her with as little delay as possible. But he would write to

his mother. He meant to choose for himself—he had indeed chosen—but he would not ask Gyneth to marry him till he had announced his intentions to Lady Mary.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END OF HOPE.

THE slumberous part of Martha's nature had asserted itself, and when she got home a sort of dream stupor had veiled over the sharp wakefulness of her jealousy and her shame. She was only conscious that Maurice must be right in whatever he did, and she must never distrust him. Then, too much exhausted to be even disturbed by the strangeness of her own behaviour, she sat awaiting his return, glad to be quite still.

Six o'clock came, and Jane announced that, if Mr. Penruddock did not come, the fish, a turbot specially reserved by Mrs. Jones from the boat-load she sent daily to Southampton,

would be spoiled; the duck would be as brown as an old shoe, and the beans as yellow as frogs. Jane shrugged her shoulders and told herself that Mr. Oliver would have been more considerate, "would no more ha' thought o' keeping his sister's dinner waiting than he'd ha' flown."

At last Martha roused to some wonder at the delay. Had Maurice stayed to dine with the Venables? And again her conscience smote her. Maurice could not commit such a rudeness.

He came at last. Really, he was only a quarter of an hour late, but the delay had seemed much longer to Martha. He looked very sorry as he apologized, but next minute he seemed in extra cheerful spirits.

During dinner, which was served in the room below, Mr. Penruddock talked chiefly about Bemford, but when Jane had departed he became silent.

Martha was watching him, and she felt sure he had something to say to her. She waited, but the silence went on.

"If Oliver were here," she said, timidly, for she felt shy to-day in her new character of

hostess, "he would go out into the garden and smoke. Shall I order a table to be carried out, so that you can have your wine out there, and smoke, too, if you like?"

Maurice laughed.

"Capital! I see how you spoil Oliver still," he said; "well,"—he gave her so sweet and loving a smile that her heart thrilled with it—"if you will let me take a brotherly privilege, I shall be glad enough to smoke on the bench there; no wine, thank you."

He rose and held the glass door open for her to pass out, and then they sat down side by side on the bench facing the sea. Maurice took out his cigar-case, but he kept it in his hand without opening it; he was too restless to smoke.

"I did not ask after your mother when you were here this morning," Martha said; she felt soothed and happy again—care and all disquiet had fled from her in Maurice's presence.

He looked troubled; he had gone to the inn to write to Lady Mary, and Martha's words brought back his fears as to how his mother would receive the news he had sent her.

"She was quite well, thank you, when I last heard from her; she was in Hertfordshire. I kept your dinner waiting while I wrote to her. She was expected home last night, but I left town before her arrival."

Then there was another pause. Martha was too happy to break it, and Maurice was thinking how he could best tell his hopes to her.

"Martha," he said at last, and he looked at her earnestly, "you have always been a good friend to me; I don't believe you even forgot me in all that time when we heard nothing about one another."

He was surprised at the glow of feeling in her eyes. How dark and luminous they were, he thought—how ready her sympathy was for him!

"I have thought of you all my life," she said; her voice was low and choked, for indeed her heart felt strangely full.

"Dear Martha, you were always good and unselfish. I am sure you thought far more of Oliver and me than we deserved, and it is this

feeling of your goodness that makes me think you are still interested in what concerns me."

There was a slight change in the bright, shy look bent on his face, for he had looked away from her over the sea, and she had been watching him. She hardly knew what she hoped for, and yet hope was stronger than fear in Martha's heart just now. All at once, before she had time to answer him, Maurice spoke.

"I wonder if you will think it unfair to Oliver if I ask Miss Ralston to be my wife?"

He looked at Martha earnestly now, and her sudden whiteness startled him, but she gave him a re-assuring smile.

"Miss Ralston is nothing to Oliver now."

Maurice felt the change in her voice; it was dull, hopeless, and he was vexed with himself for having burdened her with his confidence. Evidently Martha felt her brother's disappointment keenly; it would have been perhaps better to say nothing.

"It seems selfish to talk to you about this," he said, tenderly, "and yet I could not bear to keep it from you. I was afraid you would

think my silence unfriendly." He stopped here, resolved not to say anything more on the subject of his love unless Martha wished it.

It had suddenly grown dark and cold, Martha thought, and she sat a minute or so silent. She shivered, and, when she tried to speak, she could not reach her words, they lay too far off, and she was too feeble to get at them. But still she did speak, though her soul could not utter a syllable; she heard herself say, "You could never be selfish—please tell me," and then she stiffened herself against the back of the bench, lest she should fall forwards, for everything—life itself—was slipping away.

The sad plaintiveness in her voice touched him deeply; his heart was keenly sensitive to suffering in others. What a true friend she was, he thought, to be so deeply interested in his happiness at such a time! He did not look at her—for even in Maurice the selfishness of love asserted itself; his heart was too full of love to make him willing to disturb the vision of Gyneth that had risen before him by looking at any other face; but it was heaven to be able

to speak of her, and he told the story of his hopes and fears with most unusual eloquence. He said little of the way in which he had combated his love till he knew that Oliver's suit had ended, but Martha's attention was so chained to his words that she saw this clearly, and, even while a sharp agony began to pierce through her dull stupor, she saw how he had held back.

"And you kept away," she said, slowly, "so as not to interfere with Oliver? It was like you."

Their eyes met; the anguish in hers puzzled Maurice; he thought her devotion to Oliver surpassed any he had ever heard of.

"Hardly that. I kept away for my own sake; I was hit, but doubtless time would have cured me. I knew by my feeling about Oliver how hard hit I was."

Martha's lips were dry; her tongue, too, felt stiff, and yet her only safety she knew was in not attracting Maurice's attention to herself.

"You have not spoken yet to Miss Ralston?"

Her voice was firmer now; there was a constrained tone in it, but even this was so slight that Maurice did not notice it.

"No, I could not feel sure enough, and her aunt was with us all the time. I hardly know why," he said, dreamily, "but I feel as if I should like to speak to her in this garden."

Martha started violently, and then she caught at the arm of the bench to save herself, for her head was turning round, it seemed, and everything had grown confused and misty, all but her will and the feeling that stood out distinct in all this chaos, that, even if she died in the effort, she must hide her love from Maurice.

He was roused by her movement, but she spoke before he could get out a word.

"I beg your pardon, but these gnats sting so sharply,—you were saying——"

She rested the elbow of the hand next Maurice in the palm of the other hand, and spread her white fingers so as to shield her face; but he was not looking at her; his gaze was still upon the sea; he was absorbed in a vision of hoped-for happiness, though doubt clouded it now and then.

"Do not think me presumptuous," he said; "I have no reason to think the answer will be favourable, but I know how the last few weeks have wasted my life. Some men can stand waiting—it seems to take away my energies. I feel I could work twice as well with a definite end in view; but I am very selfish to tire you with all this."

"I asked you to tell me."

If he would only go, she thought—go away out of her sight, and leave her alone with this misery, free to cry out her woes to that still blue sea!—so still to-day that it seemed to mock the wild passion she felt rising within. Should she be able to control it, if he went on talking so sweetly, so happily beside her?

And yet, though she longed for the freedom his absence would give, she longed also to keep him beside her; it was a double pain. Never had she so loved him; she dared not raise her eyes to his lest the passion which filled her should show in them. And this was her last happiness; she knew it, and she yearned to gaze at the dear face bent downward now, so near her, and yet how far off!

To-morrow, these feelings would be sin—he would probably belong to Gyneth Ralston; he would never more care to share a thought with her. But she felt how fierce the rebellion against this was, and she put the thought back; the present, at least, was hers, and she would so govern it that Maurice should leave her to-night in entire unconsciousness of the woe he had worked.

"You are so kind," he was saying, and she knew his loving smile was bent on her, but she dared not meet it; "it has been a great relief to tell you, and to have your sympathy. Miss Ralston's affection for you seems to make a fresh bond of union between you and me, Martha."

The wretched, stricken woman shrank back into the corner of the bench, but she still kept her trembling fingers screen-wise between them.

"I hate her—oh, God, I hate her! How much longer can I bear it?" Her heart said this, but her whitening lips forced a smile.

"I can't see why she likes me," she said, dully, and then she shivered from head to foot.

Maurice roused in an instant, and Martha feared that she had betrayed herself, but he was only thinking of her health.

"You shiver—we must go in," he said, "at sunset it grows chilly near the sea. I said I should look after you, you know, and I believe I have tired you with my long story, and given you cold."

She had got up from the bench at his first words; she was so glad to turn away, and now she answered over her shoulder.

"No, you have not tired me, but I have walked too far to-day; I shall be all right to-morrow. I will go to bed early."

She knew that this would send him away; to do it was like cutting the heart out of her body, and yet it must be done; if she meant to save her secret from discovery, Maurice must go at once.

"I shall see you safe on your sofa," he said, kindly, as they went into the house, "and then I shall go and smoke along the sands. I dare-say it is quiet enough there now."

She knew there would be more light upstairs.

"I am going to stay down here, thank you," she said. She kept her back turned to the glass doors, and held out her hand.

Maurice was startled when he took her fingers into his warm grasp.

"How cold you are!" he said, anxiously, "your fingers are like ice; you ought to have a fire."

"I will go and see Jane,"—she spoke gaily, he thought—"she is sure to have a good fire all the year round. Good night, and—good success."

The last words reached him as he went out at the door; he looked round to nod his thanks, but he could not see how Martha looked—her face was in shadow—as she stood with her back to the glass doors.

CHAPTER XVII.

OLIVER'S VISIT TO LADY MARY.

OLIVER was on his way to Bayswater. He had received a note in the morning, sent by hand for greater haste, begging him to come at once to Lady Mary Penruddock.

He had not heard that Maurice was at Bemford, but it seemed to him that Lady Mary could only need his advice in her son's absence, and the wild anger with which he had been fighting ever since his interview with his old friend rose up again in fierce strength when he realized that Maurice and Gyneth Ralston were perhaps together.

But even in this mood he felt a subduing

influence when the door was opened by a tall footman, who said, in a low voice, that her ladyship was at home. There was a sort of hushed awe in the man's manner as he led the way up the thickly-carpeted stairs, which helped to calm Oliver; and, when he found himself in the dim drawing-room, where light seemed to be admitted only at the pleasure of the occupant, and the atmosphere had a subtle, mingled fragrance—the freshness of summer flowers, and the more recondite suggestiveness of sandal-wood and betel-nut—he looked round bewildered among the orderly confusion that filled every corner of the room with objects of art or rarity.

All at once, in the semi-obscurity, something white moved, and then he perceived that Lady Mary had risen into a sitting position on her sofa, and that she wore a long white soft-looking gown, and seemed very pale and weary. All but her eyes, and these looked to Oliver even brighter than usual, as she gave a keen, long glance at him from under her heavy lids.

He bowed low over the delicate ivory-coloured hand she held out, then, as she withdrew it from his, she pointed to the sofa, and he placed himself beside her.

"I got your note," he said, abruptly. He began to think some calamity must have happened to the Penruddocks.

"Yes," she said, languidly; then she looked at Oliver with tender interest. "My dear friend," she said, "I have a quarrel to settle with you. Why did you not tell me that you gave up Miss Ralston?"

She saw his face change in an instant. He turned half away from the keen eyes that were searching his face, and he spoke abruptly.

"I could not have told you so. It would not have been true."

"I am delighted to hear it, but may I ask why you are not with her at Bemford?" The hope that Maurice's announcement had crushed, for she had heard from him this morning, began to revive; perhaps Oliver and Miss Ralston had, after all, only had a lover's quarrel, and that foolish Maurice was deceiving himself.

Oliver turned and looked at her coldly and severely.

"I might give more than one answer to that question," he said, roughly; then he looked at her, and the plaintive appeal in her eyes made him feel greatly ashamed of his roughness, "but you have been very kind to me, and I owe you some confidence."

She bent gracefully forward, and put her slender fingers on his arm.

"Dear friend," she said, gently, "tell me anything that I can help you in, nothing that will give you pain."

He threw back his head impatiently, but all their fiery light had left his eyes, there was a heavy cloud in them.

"Pain!" he spoke scornfully. "One can't get along in life, I fancy, without that. All I have to tell you is that Miss Ralston won't have me."

She sat looking at him quietly. She had guessed that Maurice would not have thought seriously of Gyneth Ralston unless something of this kind had happened between the girl and

Oliver. But still Lady Mary clung to hope.

"You are not going to give her up. Ah," she patted his arm gently, "you are such a modest fellow, so innocent of the ways of women, I see; and you really believed her."

Oliver had grown very red. He was bristling all over.

"I know quite enough about women," he said, impetuously; he had got over the first impressions produced by the dim languor of the place and the manner of its occupant, and his natural pugnacity asserted itself, "quite enough to be sure that Miss Ralston was very much in earnest. It is impossible that she can ever care for me. I shall not ask her again."—Here Lady Mary shook her head with provoking incredulity of expression. Oliver went on doggedly—"Besides, your son told me he was going to propose to her."

"Such nonsense; mere talk of Maurice's." She put her handkerchief to her eyes, though they had looked dry enough just now. "What can he do with a wife—he can't keep her; and,

so long as I live, my income is only sufficient for one family." She drew her handkerchief away, and looked piteously at Oliver.

"My dear friend," she said, "you have good sense—what a gift it is—and you are really attached to Maurice. I know I may speak openly to you, this is not a real attachment, but just a fancy of his, he is always so eccentric. A man in his position cannot marry to please himself, he cannot afford to do eccentric things. If he had your prospects, dear Mr. Burridge, he might do eccentric things; as he is, marriage without money would be ruinous—a folly."

Oliver had sat listening impatiently.

"Did you send for me, Lady Mary, to ask my advice about him?" He paused; then, as no answer came, he went on, "Because I must decline to give any opinion on this subject."

Lady Mary's eyebrows became slightly arched. She thought her *protégé* had deteriorated since she had taken him in hand at Awlford. She had a great dislike to what she called "brutal sincerity."

"I can't say it was quite about Maurice." She

spoke in her most fascinating manner, and Oliver felt soothed while he listened. "I own that his letter told me that you and Miss Ralston had parted for a time, but, my dear friend,"—she shook her head playfully—"I say again, don't be in too great a hurry. Miss Ralston is not likely to prefer Maurice to you—she would not be so silly. She will refuse him, and then, if you are wise, you will seek for a reconciliation."

Something like hope dawned in Oliver's eyes.

"If I could think she would refuse him," he said, in a low voice; then he shook his head—"No, there is no chance of it. She will not refuse him."

"You are naturally in a desponding mood, and you see things upside down. When are you going to see your sister again? By-the-by, poor thing, how is she—I hope the change has benefited her?"

She looked full of charming solicitude, and, though he felt angry with her, Oliver was touched.

"Thank you, she does not get much stronger," he said. "I'm afraid this business has upset her a good deal. She had grown to like Miss Ralston."

"Yes, yes, I see. Oh! it must be, it is in every way so suitable. I don't mind telling you, dear friend, in strict confidence that I refused the poor Colonel twice before I could make up my mind, and yet"—she put her handkerchief gently to her eyes—"I was sincerely attached to him. We women"—she smiled playfully—"are wild creatures, you know, we so shrink from giving up our freedom. If I were you, I would make Gyneth Ralston accept me. When did you say you were going back to Bemford?"

"I am not going there at present—not at all, perhaps."

Oliver had resolved that he would not risk the chance of meeting Maurice and Gyneth together.

"Really!" She gave him a little appealing look. "Do you know that I was going to ask for your escort to Bemford? I think of joining

Maurice there at once; I want a little sea air,"—her eyes grew brighter—"but it is rather an involved journey to take with only a maid."

"I am very sorry I cannot go with you,"—his face stiffened—"but, till Miss Ralston has left Bemford, I prefer to keep in town."

He did not look at her, and she sat studying his determined face a minute or two before she spoke again. She despised him for his bluntness and roughness, and yet she felt afraid of him. It seemed to her that he was even capable of quarrelling with her, if she pushed him too hard.

"Will you promise me this," she said, at last, very slowly and sweetly, "if, when I get to Bemford, I write and tell you that Miss Ralston has refused Maurice, or that she is not engaged to him, will you come down to us."

He looked at her now, but his eyes were not well trained to conceal his thoughts, and she saw that he did not trust her.

"Perhaps I shall not write at all," she added, carelessly. "I shall ask Miss Burridge to summon you."

Oliver reddened; he felt guilty, and he feared that Lady Mary had detected his suspicion. A keen sense of ingratitude stirred in him.

"Forgive me; I'm a great brute, I know, and you are awfully kind to take so much interest in me," he said. "I'm afraid I have been very abrupt and unthankful, but"—the poor fellow looked into her eyes, feeling altogether humbler and more human than he had felt since his discomfiture among the pine-trees—"you are wise as well as kind, and you will make allowance, won't you?"

He rose as he spoke, and Lady Mary rose too, and stood beside him, looking full of grace and dignity. There were tears shining in her eyes as she held out her hand, and pressed his warmly with her slender fingers.

"I take a great interest in you, you are such a dear, noble fellow," she said, "it is quite impossible that you should not win the heart of any woman you love. You don't know your power, my dear friend. I tell you,"—she smiled with a yet more gracious sweetness—"all must and shall go as you wish. Good-bye. We shall meet at Bemford before long, and

then you will laugh at your present feelings. I shall start to-day."

The door closed on Oliver, and then she sighed, and sat down again on her sofa.

"He is really a good, excellent fellow," she said, passing her hand wearily over her forehead, "but he is very troublesome to manage, and abrupt to rudeness—quite devoid of little ordinary courtesies. He never even offered to go with me to the railway station."

Then she rang for her maid, and bade her be ready for the journey in two hours; meantime she could bring the new French novel which Lady Mary had left under her pillow. She had left off in the midst of an exciting situation, but when she got the book she could not rekindle interest. This affair at Bemford, in which she felt that she could take so active a part, was much more interesting than any book intrigue could be. Her journey might change everything.

"After all, life is more amusing than fiction," and, closing the book, she closed her eyes, and lay still thinking till it was time to be dressed for her journey.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DRIVE UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

WHEN Maurice left her last night, Martha had reeled up against the wall; and there she had stood sightless, senseless to all but her agony, till the maid came in to close the windows.

Then Martha roused, and, refusing Jane's anxiously proffered cup of tea, went up to her room, undressed mechanically, and lay down on her bed. She would not even try to say her prayers. What had God done for her that she should do anything for him?

But till her head lay on her pillow her agony had not fully begun, then it awoke and stung her as if with poisoned darts.

How base, how treacherous was this girl's conduct, for Martha knew how near she had been to owning her love, and Gyneth had listened so quietly, seemingly with such indifference, and had made no sign.

"I did not want to take him from her or from anyone, I only wished to keep his friendship—oh, it is too hard!" she writhed in agony on her narrow bed. "Why is she to have all—first Oliver, and then him?"

This torture had gone on for hours, and then, towards the morning, she sank into the heavy sleep of exhaustion. Jane came to her bedside to rouse her; there was a note from Mr. Penruddock, and the lad who brought it waited for an answer.

Martha sat up and read eagerly, while Jane wondered at her flushed and troubled face. The note was only to say that Maurice had forgotten to give Mrs. Venables' invitation, and to ask if Martha would like to accept it; in any case he would call and see her at the time named, she need not trouble about an answer.

Martha's first impulse was to refuse, and then she took refuge in delay.

"There is no answer," she said.

She resolved that she would not go. All the good and safe traditions of her past life seemed to have forsaken Martha now. She did not wait, or even try to consider what would be best or right for her to do, only what would spare her suffering; but she did not stop here; as she dwelt in thought over this invitation, it seemed to her a set design on the part of Gyneth to secure Maurice.

She smiled as she thought of yesterday, and her impotent resolve to frustrate Miss Ralston's hopes. What could she do against Gyneth? Would she do anything if she could? If her own love for Maurice were less intense, she might try to save him from the schemes of a girl who had shown so much art and deceit—as it was, she felt powerless. And yet this could only be a fancy, a delusion on his part, and some day he would wake from it and find himself bound for life to a girl without a heart. Should she leave Maurice to his fate, give up

voluntarily all the sweet sympathy of her life, and be left alone for evermore? Martha's was not a clear or a ready mind, it took her some time to get her thoughts into distinct shape, and even then she was slow at putting them into action. This morning, hazy and giddy with want of sleep, turning from the breakfast which Jane pressed her to eat, she was acted on by her feelings rather than by her reasoning powers, and among these feelings two stood out clearly: her intense, clinging love for Maurice, and her desire to shield him from Gyneth Ralston.

After a while action shaped itself from these feelings.

If she loved Maurice, how could she yield up this chance of being with him? she felt, too, a sort of longing to see him and Gyneth together. Yes, when Maurice came, she would go with him, let the agony be what it might afterwards, when he and Miss Ralston met.

The excitement of expectation gave Martha a colour, and when Maurice arrived he complimented her on her looks. She smiled sadly; he would never know, she thought, what his news

had done to her last night. She did not quite know, either, only that she felt strangely weak in body, and yet unusually excited.

"That's right," he said, cheerfully. "I am so glad you are going. I believe it is time to go and meet the carriage."

He held the little gate for her to pass out, and the girl found herself walking by his side along the dusty road that led inland. Very soon they heard the sound of wheels, and in another moment there was Gyneth mounted up in a tiny carriage, driving a big brown horse, Mrs. Venables beside her.

Miss Ralston was looking serious; she also had wished so very much to see Mr. Penruddock and Martha together, and now she shrank from this meeting with superstitious dread. She felt irritable, discontented with herself and with her surroundings. She wished her aunt had been content to take this drive alone with her, instead of asking Mr. Penruddock to go with them; and then, remembering the almost wild joy she felt when she heard the invitation given, she despised herself for not knowing her own mind. So that

by the time the little basket-carriage came round she was not in a pleasant frame of mind for the expedition.

Mrs. Venables noticed how quiet she was, but she had decided that her niece and Mr. Penruddock were admirably suited, and she attributed Gyneth's silence to love. Mrs. Venables was just fifty, and yet she believed in true love as implicitly as any girl of twenty might, and her heart went out warmly to lovers. She smiled to herself with quite a mischievous twinkle in those sweet dark eyes, as she thought what a good idea it had been to include Miss Burridge in the invitation, for, as she was an invalid, she of course would not want to go scrambling about, but would be content to remain in the carriage, and this would quite prevent her sweet, unselfish Kitty from having scruples about leaving her aunt alone.

This and other small webs went on spinning themselves airily in Mrs. Venables's simple mind as Gyneth drove along the road to Foreland. She was so unused to planning that it was, perhaps, quite as much of an amusement to her

as less innocent scheming was to Lady Mary. Gyneth had been amused when they started by the disproportion between the horse and the carriage; it seemed as if the high, powerfully-made brown brute could send them flying anywhere, if he had a mind to kick at the cockle-shell vehicle to which he was harnessed. But he went on steadily, spite of legions of tormenting flies, till they reached the road with its honeysuckle hedges beyond the cottage.

"They are coming." Gyneth from her higher seat could see on in front, and she saw that Mr. Penruddock looked very bright and smiling, and that Miss Burridge walked beside him, looking pale and tired. "I wonder she does not look happy, too," the girl said to herself, then her hopes grew—had she been weaving a romance all this while? and was Martha's feeling for Mr. Penruddock only the fit return for the brother-like affection he had expressed for her?

She bent forward to greet Martha, and was surprised and mortified by her coldness. It was not mere shyness, for she could not help seeing

that Miss Burridge smiled pleasantly at Mrs. Venables, and thanked that lady, as she took her place facing her, for her kindness in asking her to join the party. But Gyneth's sweetness conquered, and in a minute she was asking Martha how she had been since she saw her.

"You are tired now, I fear, with the walk. We could easily have driven down to your gate."

"It would have been quite unnecessary. I am not tired, thank you."

There was nothing to find fault with, but Gyneth felt that Martha was much farther from her than she had been in that last talk among the myrtle blossoms.

Somehow—she could not have said why—her interest in her new friend had slackened; minute by minute her very consciousness of other things faded, every thought, every sense became absorbed in the companion who sat facing her. He did not speak often, but whenever she raised her eyes she met his gaze fixed on her. He, too, was so utterly absorbed as to be regardless of what was passing around him.

The horse flicked his tail angrily when the

cloud of his stinging foes became unbearable. A lark seemed to be for ever singing overhead. But there was nothing else to disturb the blissful dream into which these two had drifted.

All at once Mrs. Venables cried, with some alarm,

"Kitty darling, we are almost in the ditch," and Miss Ralston roused in much confusion to a consciousness that she was far from the middle of the road—her trusty horse having profited by the shade some out-stretching oak-branches from the hedge on the left were casting on that side of the way.

"I beg your pardon," she said, and Penruddock thought how lovely that flush had made her.

Martha thought so, too, and if Mrs. Venables had watched the face of her now silent *vis-à-vis* she might have seen a scowl in the eyes so intently fixed on her niece's face.

Martha was in a dream, too, but it had none of the blissful languor that characterised Gyneth's. It seemed to her that she had made

a mistake, that she had come there against her better judgment. She saw Maurice's eyes fixed on Gyneth, and she set her teeth, and clenched her hands tightly, so as to keep herself from leaping out into the road, reckless of what might happen.

They had driven on some way through charming wild flower-bordered roads, with shady trees overhead, then through a sort of open wood, where the blackberries promised unlimited feasting later on; and masses of teazle rose royally beside the way. Soon after this, they found themselves in so narrow a lane that Gyneth laughingly asked what would happen if she met another vehicle. She had scarcely spoken, when a loud hulloa came from the hedge on the right, and she drew up and came to a standstill.

A few steps in advance was a gate set in the hedge, and now this was being slowly opened by a countryman wearing a smock frock, and carrying a crooked stick. The man had one of those pleasant brown healthy faces rarely seen in towns; his deep-set grey eyes were full of

happy, leisurely thought, and he smiled at Miss Ralston as he touched his hat.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said. "I was feared your horse might ha' took fright."

Then he turned away, and held the gate behind him open, and there wheeled into the narrow, flowery-hedged lane a singular procession—seventy or eighty horned, fleecy creatures, so thickly covered with wool that it seemed as if they must pay toll to the hedges as they went in orderly procession down the lane. As soon as all had passed through, the shepherd placed himself at the head of his flock, his black and white collie coming last of all.

Maurice got out of the carriage and called after the shepherd; they had been driving some miles without meeting a soul, and they wanted guidance to the cliff. The shepherd came back slowly, so as not to frighten his sheep, and only a few steps, for they stopped at once, disposed to wheel round again, but for the narrowness of the lane; he pointed across the field on the right, and told them they would soon find a gate into it, but that the carriage could go

no nearer to the white cliff. Then he resumed his place in front of his flock, and a turn in the lane soon hid him and his train from sight.

"I will stay here," said Mrs. Venables; then she looked at Martha. "Will you go with them to see the cliff, or will you stay with me?"

Martha waited an instant, but Maurice did not speak; he was looking across in the direction pointed out by the shepherd.

"You will come, won't you?" said Gyneth—she really wished for Martha's company.

As she spoke, she looked across at Miss Burridge, and her last hope faded, shrivelled under the light of those intense eyes. They were fixed on Maurice, and the love and pain mingled in their expression wrung the girl's heart as she saw it. No, she had been mistaken; Martha loved Maurice far better, far more strongly than she did. Gyneth could not stay to think; she felt that, if she did, her purpose might fail. Dimly she knew that something as yet unrealized was rousing in the depths of her nature, and, like some long-slumbering volcano, was flinging up this cloud of confusion which

weighed so heavily on her spirits. She did not look at Martha, but she touched her arm gently.

"Please come with us," she said; "it will be ever so much nicer if you do."

Martha looked at her as she ended, and Gyneth started at the bitter glance that met hers.

"I prefer to stay with your aunt," the girl said, harshly, "and—and I am tired."

Gyneth only bowed. Why did Martha treat her so unkindly, so rudely, even? But she had no time to think. Mr. Penruddock was standing beside her, bidding her drive on some little way to where he could see a road crossing the end of the lane.

"There's a cottage there," he said, "and I will find some one to hold the horse. Your aunt might get tired of sitting still in the carriage."

Gyneth thought how delightful it was to be cared for and managed for. It seemed to her that she could have submitted her will completely to Mr. Penruddock's, and yet when Oliver Burridge had tried to control her ever so

little, she had always felt rebellious. But she sighed without answering, and drove on as he directed.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN OBSERVANT SHEPHERD.

MEANWHILE the shepherd had led his sheep to their fresh pasture, and, as he came back, he stood still by the five-barred gate, to which he had directed Mr. Penruddock and Miss Ralston, and watched them sauntering in a careless, unequal fashion, first over the broad waste land, and then, skirting the ploughed field beyond it, they kept to the right till they reached a path along the edge of the cliff, from which a precipitous descent, veiled by flowery tangle, went down a considerable distance to the shingle. The shepherd smiled to himself, he thought he was watching happy lovers, and, in his leisurely way, he kept his eyes fixed on them. He saw

them make a sudden pause when they came to the middle of the waste ground, and he nodded his head approvingly, for he knew that the bold outline of the white cliff revealed itself at that point, rising grandly from the bay below; but he noted that, though they had come so far, and were now going over much rough and broken ground, in pursuit of this wonderful feature of nature, they did not take a long look at the cliff. They seemed to be wholly occupied with one another.

That is to say, the man's eyes never left the woman; while she appeared to be deeply engrossed by the difficulties of the broken ground, in spite of the assistance constantly rendered by her companion.

But the shepherd had a quiet, observant mind, and he wished to see the end of this story, of which he had witnessed a part. For a short time a sudden curve inwards in the hedge—the cliff had fallen away some years before—hid them from his curiosity. He lit his pipe, and, leaning against the gate, smoked peacefully for a while. When he looked round, the pair were

coming towards him, they had already reached the waste ground on which the gate opened. The girl came first, her head was bent and her face looked troubled. The shepherd looked on to her companion, but Mr. Penruddock's face was turned away. Still the patient observer gathered that he, too, was troubled, for he walked hurriedly, and had quite given up the happy, lounging gait which he had had at starting. Now he struck at the thistles with some impatience, as if he had a grudge against them for cumbering the ground.

The shepherd was slow at receiving new impressions, but the happy picture these two had left on his mind was disturbed.

"They two have fallen out," he said; "perhaps he has asked her, and she has said No."

He opened the gate at this, and touched his hat to the girl as she passed through.

"Thank you," Miss Ralston said, gravely, but the smile which had so charmed the shepherd did not come into her downcast face. She went on quickly, and almost ran along the lane, by the way the carriage had taken.

Martha was looking dully up the lane when Gyneth came in sight. The agony of suspense had been more than she could bear. She had been trying to nerve herself for the vision which she knew might any moment emerge from between those two green flower-gemmed hedges. The two lovers had looked so happy when they went away. What would their joy be now!

Mrs. Venables had grown weary of her silent companion, and, as Miss Burridge preferred to remain in the carriage, she walked up and down, and at last, when the mistress of the cottage came to the door to look at the lady, Mrs. Venables gladly entered into talk with her.

Martha was surprised to see Gyneth alone, and her eyes read the girl's face eagerly. She was utterly puzzled by its want of brightness; but Miss Ralston roused herself, and began to talk of the cliff; by the time her aunt and Mr. Penruddock joined them, she had recovered, although she was, perhaps, quieter than usual.

But Mr. Penruddock made no such effort at

self-control; he scarcely spoke, and once he answered a question put by Martha so abruptly that Mrs. Venables felt surprised. She saw that something had gone wrong, and she felt impatient to know what it was. At last they reached the point where a road branched off towards Bemford. This was some way above the cottage, and Gyneth turned her horse so as to take the road to Foreland.

"We can get out here, can we not?" Maurice said to Martha. "It is a pity to take Mrs. Venables so much out of her way."

Gyneth looked at Martha and remonstrated, but Martha had understood that Maurice wished to get out without delay.

"It will be much better," she said, and then she bade good-bye to both ladies, and thanked Gyneth for her excellent driving with far more cordiality of manner than she had shown when they met.

Miss Ralston drove her aunt home in perfect silence, and Mrs. Venables thought it best to leave her in peace, her own theory being that everything, whether it be joy or sorrow, re-

quires time to digest before it can be entirely understood, or truly imparted to others.

She pictured to herself that Gyneth would seek her out in her room, and tell her what had happened with Mr. Penruddock.

But long before they reached their own gate, almost as soon as they turned into the avenue, Gyneth exclaimed,

"There is some one looking out for us. Why, it is Uncle Charles."

And very soon Mr. Venables met them, and his wife got out and walked home with him.

Mrs. Venables' pleasant picture fell into small pieces as she listened to her husband's news. Peace and quiet had departed from her Bemford life, for he had come on first to say that, having met Lady Mary Penruddock at Ryde, and having learned her intention of staying at Bemford, he had invited her to take up her abode with them, till she could find suitable lodgings.

Mrs. Venables gazed at her husband with a bewildered face.

"Charles dear," she said, but that was

all. Had he not just come home after a week's absence, and could she welcome him with a scolding? She, however, hurried away from him as soon as she reached the porch, to have a room got ready, and this, as the house was small, obliged Gyneth and her sister to share Louisa's room, while Gyneth's was prepared for the visitor.

Mr. Venables, however, was quite unruffled by the fuss caused by his impulsive hospitality, and was impatient only that his wife should come downstairs to him. At last he asked Gyneth to go and fetch her aunt, and the girl was very glad to be released.

There was a small sitting-room attached to her bed-room, and she went into this, glad to escape from observation.

She had been pleased to see her uncle, for she dreaded her aunt's tender sympathy; and yet Gyneth had never felt so utterly alone, so forlorn as she did now, when, after locking the door, she sat down in a little wicker chair near it. It was not the forlornness of the outcast, or that of one deserted and left alone by the

fault of others; there was bitter self-reproach in the troubled face, as it sank wearily between her clasped hands. Yes, a bitterness that was like remorse. Gyneth longed to begin the afternoon over again. If she only could do this, would she not act differently! She had been mad, unreal, to give up a bliss that seemed too good for earthly happiness, just from a Quixotic desire to save Martha pain. She did not know, till she heard Maurice say "I love you," what was in her heart. She could not give him up. She put her hand on her heart in wild anguish, as if she would—she must soothe its pain.

"And I thought I was calm and quiet," she said. "How little I knew about myself."

For, indeed, the girl was frightened at the tumult that had been stirred in her. She felt all at once rebellious, self-willed, passionate against any hindrance that divided her from the love she had rejected, and the worst was that she had been so firm in her rejection that he would never try his fate again. A desperate fear of the power which she felt he possessed, had made her manner determined, in spite of herself; and he had

looked so wounded when she refused to give a reason for her refusal. She had no tears; she uncovered her face, and looked wildly round her, as if she hoped to find a deliverance from her despair.

All at once a thought came, and hope leapt up into life. She might write to him. Next moment the blood rushed to her face, dyeing it and her sweet throat and delicate ears with shame; and the shame brought with it a fit of hearty weeping.

Then poor Gyneth, deeply humbled, fell on her knees and poured out her sorrow where alone she could get real comfort.

She was heavy-hearted still when she rose up again, but she was at peace; she had perhaps judged wrongly as regarded Mr. Penruddock, but she was sure she had been right about Martha. It seemed to her that the look which she had surprised, and which had fallen like a doom on her own happiness, had been a warning sent against the self-indulgence which had almost mastered her, and closed her eyes wilfully to the fact of Martha's love.

"It would have been cruel, cowardly," she said, while the hot tears fell from her face on to her hand. "I know by my own feelings what she must suffer, and what can my love be compared with hers?—she said she had loved all her life."

She leaned back in her chair and thought how all this had come about. Martha had indeed been her evil genius; Louisa had tried to dissuade her from seeking this shy, lonely woman, and her gentle aunt even had playfully rallied her about her devotion to this new friend; she herself had been puzzled by the fascination which Martha's society possessed for her.

"And she always shrank from me." The girl grew pale with a half mysterious fear. "Had she a consciousness that we should spoil one another's lives? I shrink from her now, and yet I love her, for it is not her fault, how can she help loving him?"

There was a rapping at the door, and Louisa's bright, cheery voice saying,

"Open the door, darling, open quick; it's Louy. Lady Mary has come."

And Gyneth's reverie of sorrow and love had to be thrust away, for she knew that she should have no chance of solitude till Lady Mary's visit was over.

CHAPTER XX.

LADY MARY ON MARRIAGE.

LOUISA slipped her arm round her sister's waist, when she had kissed and chattered at her for about five minutes.

"Come down and see her, darling; you can't think how nice she is—ever so much better worth knowing than your friend Miss Burridge. But, Kitty, what's the matter?—you've been crying. I insist on knowing what's the matter. Have you and Oliver Burridge quarrelled?"

Gyneth smiled.

"You must be a witch—yes, we have quarrelled and parted; we never could have suited, dear," she said, in answer to her sister's horri-

fied protesting face, "so it is much better. Please don't say anything——"

Louisa drew a deep breath of surprise, and pursed up her round, rosy lips.

"My goodness, Kitty, I don't believe there's another girl in London who would give up such a chance; he's handsome, and young, and very clever, and sure to be rich, and Lady Mary says he will certainly get into Parliament and hold a most distinguished position; what can you want more? Lady Mary says he only wants *savoir-faire,* and she says society will give him that so quickly. Oh, it is a terrible pity, it is, indeed. Are you sure it is quite off?"

There were tears shining in Louisa's blue eyes, she was so really sorry for her sister; it seemed to this young maiden that at four-and-twenty it was most disastrous to give up such an excellent chance of settling in life. Who could say that Gyneth would have such another offer?

"Quite sure," her sister said, in a low voice.

Louy wiped her eyes, and looked aggrieved.

"Well, Kitty, you go in for being good and religious, and you *are* good, of course—oh, I

don't mean to say you're not!" She spoke very fast, for Gyneth moved towards the door. "But I don't call this doing your duty; if anything happens to uncle and aunt, what is to become of us? Little things that Uncle Charles says sometimes make me think he won't leave much behind him. If you had married Oliver Burridge, you would have had as beautiful a home as you chose, and you could have taken me in till I found one for myself; it certainly was your duty to marry him."

Her fair forehead was puckered with vexation.

"I have been wrong in some ways," Gyneth said, firmly, "but I should have been wicked if I had married Mr. Burridge, Louy, because I never could have loved him. Now I am going down to see Lady Mary."

The two elder ladies were in the drawing-room. Lady Mary thought it all looked home-like and pleasant. Mrs. Venables was very tired, but she had given up her sofa to her guest, and Lady Mary lying there, with tea on a little table beside her, felt satisfied with her

hostess and her quarters. Gyneth had benefited so much by the sea-breezes that, spite of her recent agitation, she looked lovelier than Lady Mary could have expected. She felt a pang of alarm as she saw this charming girl come up to her sofa.

"What can you think of me, my dear Miss Ralston, for intruding on your aunt in this way without invitation? But indeed I am so glad to be among you, out of the heat and loneliness of London; and Ryde is worse—positively every other house has lodgings to let in the window; it seems a dead place. Have you seen my son?" She addressed the question to Mrs. Venables, but kept her eyes fixed on Gyneth.

"Yes," Mrs. Venables said, "we have not long parted from him," and she looked at her visitor, in the hope of taking her attention from her niece.

Gyneth sat still, but she felt that a flush rose on her face, and she was determined that Lady Mary should not suspect her trouble.

"Yes,"—she turned a smiling face to that lady's inspection—"we have had a charming

afternoon. We all took a long drive. Louy, we must get the little carriage again, and I will drive you and Lady Mary to see this cliff—it is really worth seeing."

"And Maurice went with you?"

Gyneth felt that those narrow, half-veiled dark eyes were reading her heart.

"Your son went with us, and Miss Burridge," said Mrs. Venables; she, too, felt that there was something forced in her visitor's manner.

Lady Mary looked puzzled for a moment.

"Miss Burridge!—oh, then she is here still? Ah, yes. Do you know when her brother is expected? But I suppose"—with a pleasant glance at Gyneth—"I should ask such a question at head-quarters. Do you expect him soon, my dear?"

"No," said Gyneth; she determined not to enter into this question again.

Louisa was leaning over the sofa, and trying to attract Lady Mary's attention, but the visitor turned away, and fixed her long dark eyes on the elder sister, who had taken up her embroidery, and was bending over it.

"I must get you to take me to see Miss Burridge," she said. "Poor thing! I feel for her, I don't think she will live long. You know I saw a good deal of her at Awlford, when I was helping her to nurse her brother; there's something serious the matter with her. She and Maurice are singularly fond of one another; I remember now he told me he was coming down here to see her," and Lady Mary shrugged her shoulders, and asked her audience, especially Gyneth, in dumb show for their sympathy in this absurdity of her son's.

"Of course one does not wonder at the girl," she went on. "She has seen few people, and she has known him a long while; but his infatuation puzzles me. However, I suppose it amuses him, and, poor fellow, as he can't marry, it seems hard to grudge him a little platonic pleasure."

Every word she said had eased the restraint which weighed on Gyneth. It was such a relief to see that his mother was ignorant of her son's real feelings.

"Why can't he marry, poor fellow?" Louisa said in the pitying, old womanish way that made her so amusing.

It amused Lady Mary, and she smiled at her young friend, and softly stroked the hand that was next her.

"Because he has nothing to marry on, you innocent child, positively nothing. When he is some years older, he will have risen in his profession, and perhaps," she said this so doubtfully that Gyneth's anger rose—"perhaps he may attain some eminence as a lawyer, but even then he will be safest in marrying money—indeed, he must do so. There is nothing like having a wife well provided for. Do you not think, dear Mrs. Venables, that women are very selfish to drag men down by marriage?"

"I beg your pardon," said Mrs. Venables, doubtfully. "I don't think I quite understand."

"Oh! I do." Louisa looked delighted at her own sagacity. "Lady Mary means that a woman is selfish if she thinks only of her own happiness in marriage, and neglects the duties she owes to her own family and to society."

Lady Mary gave the girl a sweet, bright smile.

"That is charmingly said, dear; but I mean something more than that, something that your aunt will feel more strongly than you can, dear child." She raised herself on her elbow, and turned to Mrs. Venables. "I mean that a woman really does great harm, and tends to subvert society, when she marries a man with small means, just because she loves him and he loves her. She forces him to give up society, she has to give it up herself, her children either sink into an inferior class, or else grow up poor, and proud, and eccentric; and the love is sure to wear out when the husband finds he has given up all that was worth living for."

Lady Mary sank back, tired by her own eloquence. Before Mrs. Venables could answer, Gyneth spoke.

"I wonder which is best worth living for, the world, or the happiness which two people who love can make for one another."

She looked straight before her, and so missed the deprecating glance which travelled on from her face to that of Mrs. Venables.

Mrs. Venables smiled, and then she looked archly at her visitor.

"If I were to tell you what I think about this subject, you would say I was quite unsuited to be the chaperon of these girls. I am so very old-fashioned in my ideas about marriage."

A slight frown contracted Lady Mary's forehead, but she smiled.

"Yes, dear Mrs. Venables, I quite understand. You and I, who have been so happy in marriage, wish others the like good fortune; not for worlds would I have Maurice marry against his will; in fact, I was only joking about Miss Burridge. There is another attraction, a far more suitable one, farther north, a girl who would please me quite well as a daughter, and who has a good fortune. It must be so wretched for a girl without money to feel that she is a hindrance rather than a help to her husband. Don't you think so, my dear?"

She turned to Gyneth, but the girl had moved away to the farther end of the long room, and was putting into water some of the honeysuckle which Maurice had gathered for her

during their drive. She did not care for Lady Mary's hint about the northern heiress, but she writhed angrily under the extreme coolness with which Maurice's mother had explained herself. By what right, she thought, did this woman take it for granted that her son was anything to her?

She did not hear her aunt's answer.

"Don't you think a good, loving wife can be of more use to a husband than one whom he has married from interest only?"

"Ah, that is just the mistake which all romantic people make; they seem to think that money comes in the way of love—I assure you it adds to it. Suppose a man thinks of the money first, if the girl is fond of him, and does her duty and so on, he will love her, after a bit, quite as much as is necessary, depend upon it. You see, people in society have so much to do. They have little time for one another, and, therefore, this question is of far less importance to them than to recluse husbands and wives who are all in all; and," she added, with a little laugh, "I expect

they are sadly dull at times, and, if they would only confess it, long for variety."

Mrs. Venables smiled and shook her head, but Louisa listened to every word, and sighed.

"How good it would have been for Kitty, if she had been guided by such advice as this!" she thought.

CHAPTER XXI.

FRUIT FROM THE DEAD SEA.

WHEN one considers the importance of a man or woman in the scheme of creation, compared with that of a cloud, or a tree, of an ocean, or a wind, or any mere natural feature, it seems strange that mental atmosphere should not have the attributes of the atmosphere of nature; that frost and east wind should make themselves felt from one end of our island to the other, and yet that a corresponding mental atmosphere should not spread, if not from one end of the land to the other, at any rate from one home to another in adjacent places. This is a question which has yet to be investigated, for that the fact exists sometimes, is beyond dispute.

In the case of Maurice Penruddock and Martha Burridge, it was only natural that the links which united them to Gyneth should continue the wave of feeling in them which had pursued her to her home. They were both sad and silent.

It could not have occurred to Martha, accustomed in all things to subordinate her will to Maurice's, and in his presence to live his life, that she might interrupt his reverie, and so they walked on along the dusty road without speaking, till Jack, Martha's yellow-haired *protégé,* rose up from the swampy ditch beside the road, his red face mottled over with dirt.

Martha saw that the child had been crying, and in an instant she knelt beside him, and her arm was round his neck.

"What's the matter, Jacky?" she said; Jacky put a red fist into each eye, and began to blubber.

"It's lost, an' I tan't find it," he sobbed, "it's falled in there;" he jerked his head towards the ditch.

"What have you lost, my boy?" and Mr. Penruddock dabbled his stick in the oozy,

swampy scum of green weeds, but he found nothing.

"What is it, tell me, Jacky?" Martha spoke tenderly, and pressed the little fellow to her.

But Jacky, finding himself pitied and caressed, had begun to howl audibly.

"Oh——" he roared, "she gived it me herself —she—she never gived nothin' to Nance—oh —oh—"

Maurice looked impatient. He wondered how Martha could hug that squalling brat, hideous just now with his dirty face distorted by crying.

"Come, come," he said, "speak up, my little man. If you can't say what you've lost, we can't find it, you know."

The stern tone brought Jacky to himself. He left off crying, shook himself away from Martha's arm, and looked sulkily at Mr. Penruddock.

"It wer' mine," he said, in an aggrieved voice. "She gived it herself; not she,"—he pointed at Martha—"t'other 'un."

"What was it?" Maurice now spoke eagerly, and not at all sternly.

But the remembrance was too much for Jacky.

"It wur a real silver thruppence—oh, oh!" he howled out, and then he flung himself down on the grass-bordered road.

Martha looked pitiful, but Maurice could not help laughing.

"Get up, like a man," he said, "don't go howling as if you were a baby. Here's threepence for you."

Jacky got up at once, but he looked disappointed to see copper money instead of silver, and he only muttered feeble thanks.

"I expect you have spoiled that child," Maurice said, as they went on.

"He is really a dear little fellow, and I love children—boys, I mean, you know I do."

"Yes," but he did not meet her eyes; he was again absorbed in his own thoughts. "Have you any message to Oliver?" he went on. "I am going back by the early boat; it goes direct from here the first thing in the morning, you know."

"Yes."

Martha spoke absently; it seemed not to matter what she said, she had come to the end of everything.

"Have you any message!" he repeated.

Martha was looking fixedly at him, and their eyes met.

"Come in, won't you?" she said, looking on to the gate close by. "I am sure you have something to tell me."

"No—I don't think so."

He could not go in. How could he tell her what had happened; how, in the very place where he had confided his hopes to Martha, could he relate their utter failure?

Martha's lips trembled with eagerness; his love was lost to her—had never been hers, but she would not yield up his confidence; that, at least, had belonged to her, and should belong to her still.

"You said I was your friend," she said, fixing her eyes on his, and her heart went out with such a longing to ease his pain that all shyness left her.

Man or woman must be hard indeed who can refuse confidence to true affection when the heart aches with sorrow. Maurice yielded, perhaps, as much to the firmness of her tone as to the affection which spoke in it.

"There is not much to tell; two or three words will do it,"—he held open the gate, and then, when she had passed through, closed it, and, leaning his arms on the top, rested his chin on them. "Dear old Martha, you are a true friend. I was mistaken, that's all; even your friendship can't help me."

Martha looked stupefied.

"Do you mean," she said, slowly, "that you have told Miss Ralston you love her, and that she has refused you?"

He nodded; and then there was silence, except for the sound of the returning sea, thundering, with long rolls, on the stony beach, its waves breaking in vain efforts to reach the cliff.

A question burned on Martha's lips, and yet she could not shape it. At last she said, abruptly,

"Did she give any reason?"

"No,"—he spoke wearily, as if he would rather keep silence,—"but she said she had one, and she said it must make a lasting barrier between us." He stood musing some minutes, and then he said, "Could she mean my mother —I mean my mother's wish that I should marry some one with money?"

"I don't know."

It was miserable to feel that she could give him no comfort—nothing but the commonest sympathy, and she knew that this was not spontaneous, only half-hearted, or else what was the meaning of the relief that had spread over her distracted mind? She looked earnestly at Maurice, and the deep sadness, the anguish stamped on his face, spread into her heart, so near to his, that it was impossible it should not partake his feelings. And, as this sorrow took complete possession of her, Martha wondered at herself. It was the same revulsion that she had felt about Oliver; it was strange, she thought, that Gyneth should each time have caused it.

"Why need you give up hope?" she said, at last, "she may have decided hastily."

He shook his head.

"No, I saw that she was not taken by surprise; she was quite collected, quite prepared with her answer. I could not have thought," he said, with a sigh, "that she would have been so collected. Well, the dream is over."

He smiled sadly but sweetly at Martha, and held out his hand.

"But how selfish I am! Poor Martha!" he said, "instead of cheering you up, I have brought you nothing but disappointment. At least,"—he looked rueful,—"you can't be jealous of me now; I have fared no better than Oliver has. Good-bye."

Martha turned ashy white while he spoke, but she recovered herself in a minute, and, when Maurice turned away, she stood watching him as he crossed the little bridge, and then went along the edge of the cliff beside the sea. There were no sands just now, though the tide would have turned before Maurice reached Bemford.

Was she glad or sorry? Martha asked herself. She could not tell. As she walked through the flowery garden, with bent head and hands clasped behind her, it seemed to her that she was like the dog of the old spelling-book—she had wished to keep for herself something which might have made the joy of Gyneth Ralston's life, but which could never be hers. For she knew now the reality of Maurice's affection for her, felt surer of its truth than she had ever been, and knew, at the same time, that it was as like her own feelings as moonlight is to sunshine, as the brightness of glass to the rich flashing of the diamond.

The sharp agony was over for Martha. She had made her renunciation during the night, while she lay staring at the pale square made by her uncurtained window in the darkness, and also during the keener pain of that drive. She had suffered horribly then, and she felt the reaction now as she went feebly into the house, and asked Jane to bring her a cup of tea.

No, she did not rejoice in Maurice's sorrow; she grieved for him, and yet away from him

it grew harder to her each moment to wish that Gyneth Ralston would reconsider her decision.

CHAPTER XXII.

USELESS.

THE doctor had called while Martha was out driving, and Jane promised to let him know when his services would be required, for she was obliged to confess that Miss Burridge had seemed better ever since Mr. Penruddock's visit.

For some days life seemed to stagnate in the cottage at Foreland, and, with the exception of Jacky's daily visit, no one but Mrs. Jones passed through the little gate. Spite of the improvement in Martha's looks, she felt so strangely tired and languid that she did not stir beyond the garden, spending her time either with a book, or else sitting on the beach, gazing out

over the sea. She could not bear the thought of leaving Bemford. She knew well enough that the intense happiness of those first hours spent with Maurice had been a fiction, wild and improbable as any ever told, but yet the happiness to her had been real—a part of her life which she could never more be robbed of. So long as she stayed at Bemford, she could sit on the bench where Maurice had sat beside her, and could picture his face, and the sweet looks and words he had given her. Little by little she owned to herself that it was a relief that he was free, so that it was no shame to cherish his image in her heart. At first she had hesitated about staying on at Bemford, but Oliver had urged this strongly in his last letter. He had to be much at Awlford, he said, and he wanted Martha to be quite strong before she came back; so, when, a few days after, Mrs. Jones asked how much longer she should require the cottage, Miss Burridge said she should probably want it till the end of September.

Mrs. Jones departed with a smiling face. She was accustomed to lower the rent for Sep-

tember, when the wind had a dismal way of howling round the Foreland—howling and shrieking too—and sometimes came up boldly to see what was doing in the little group of cottages at the point, and carried off everything that lay convenient to buffet at its will—visitors were apt to leave the cottage at the end of August. But, in the midst of her smiling self-content on her lodger's softness, Mrs. Jones stopped short, and, hurrying back to the kitchen, told Jane there was "a power of ladies at the gate, real quality."

Jane had just time to warn her mistress, when the ladies appeared—Lady Mary Penruddock and the two Miss Ralstons.

Martha felt disturbed as she received her visitors. Maurice's mother had a strange power over her self-possession, though to-day Lady Mary declared herself delighted with all she saw, and applied the most charming epithets to Miss Burridge's cottage.

"If I were only not so delicate, so susceptible to wind and damp, the only drawbacks here, I should think,"—she looked round admiringly,—"it is just the retreat I should like. Quite

inspiring for a poet, I fancy. Do you write verses, Miss Burridge?"

"No," Martha answered.

"I should think it was very dull here; one would soon get tired of it," Louisa said. "Now confess, Miss Burridge, how many people did you see yesterday?"

Martha smiled.

"I saw no one but Jacky; but then I stayed in the garden. Still it is quite possible I should only have seen a coast-guard, or Mrs. Jones, if I had gone out."

"Most exhilarating sights," Louisa said, with a little laugh. "Are you going to stay much longer?"

"Another month or so."

Louisa gave a little cry.

"You are much-enduring," she said. "Why, we are so tired of Bemford that we are going away this week."

All this while Gyneth had not spoken, she had been looking at the flowers, but now Martha came up to her.

"Are you really going away so soon?"

Their eyes met, and each of them felt that the old attraction had come back, the barrier that had fallen between them was removed.

"Yes," said Gyneth, simply, "I believe we all wish to go."

"I wonder you ever came." Lady Mary gave a slight laugh. "It is just the last place likely to suit your uncle or this lively little girl. Very nice for sketching, and for children and nurses, I daresay, but too much out of the way of everything else. A month of it would really kill me!"

Gyneth never contradicted Lady Mary. There was no hope they could ever see anything from the same point of view, but Martha, to her own surprise, felt courageous.

"Everybody does not want the same things to make their happiness," she said, simply, "and I should think Bemford would suit some people; but then they must have resources in themselves."

Louisa flushed and felt indignant, but Lady Mary smiled graciously.

"I am sure it suits you," she said. "You

look ever so much better. I advise you to stay as long as possible, dear Miss Burridge, and come home quite strong. Now I think we must be going. Our poor horse will be tired of waiting, and that boy may tease it."

"Are you in such a hurry? Must you go too?" Martha spoke to Gyneth.

"Oh! no," she answered. "My sister will drive Lady Mary, and I can walk home presently. We came to tell you we were going away, and to say Good-bye." Then, when they had seen the two ladies depart, Gyneth added, "I thought perhaps I might stay a little longer with you—if you wished it." There was a pause, and then, moved by an impulse too strong to resist, she came close up to Martha. "We seem to have fallen apart;" she said, "why is it?"

There was such a yearning sadness in Gyneth's sweet eyes that Martha bent down and kissed her warmly, and Gyneth returned the kiss. The one movement was quite as involuntary as the other had been, but each woman felt happier than she had been before.

They paced up and down the garden in silence—only Gyneth put her hand within Martha's arm, and so they drew closer to one another.

"I may go and see you when you are at Fulham again," Gyneth said, after a while.

"I do not think I shall go back to Fulham. Oliver says he shall give up the cottage—he only took it for a year."

"Shall you go back to Awlford? I think the North is too cold for you," Gyneth said, affectionately.

Martha looked at her, and then she pressed Gyneth's hand close to her side.

"I am to stay here a month; why need I look forward beyond that? But it is very good of you to care about me."

"Why should I not care?" said Gyneth, gravely. "I am not changeable."

Martha gazed at her earnestly, so earnestly that a flush came into Gyneth's delicate face.

"And yet you have changed," Martha said; "when first I saw you, you seemed to me the

very incarnation of brightness, I thought you had a fund of mental sunshine which would last for ever."

Gyneth looked up, smiling.

"And now?" she said, inquiringly.

"You go on too fast." Martha spoke seriously. "I have not come to now yet; when I saw you here, and we talked about Oliver, you were sad, but you had not a hopeless look in your eyes."

Gyneth looked up in surprise; she and Martha had changed places, she was being sought now, instead of seeking confidence.

"I shall ask you to tell me the future, as well as the past and present," and she smilingly held out her open hand to Martha.

Martha took it, pressed it gently, and then let it fall.

"I want to ask you a question," she said; "even if you think me very strange, I must ask you." Then she paused, while Gyneth's breath came quickly with her restrained agitation. "Why did you refuse Maurice Penruddock?"

A look of intense surprise spread over Gyneth's face.

"How did you know I had refused him?" she said, impulsively.

Martha flushed deeply.

"He told me." Then she went on bravely, "And he said you would not tell him why you did not accept his love."

"I—I refused Oliver."

Gyneth spoke faintly, and she looked confused.

Martha turned round so as to face her; the hopeless sadness in Gyneth's sweet eyes smote on her heart again, and, strengthened by its very pain, she took the girl by both hands.

"Miss Ralston, once I did not think you sincere, now I know that you are truth itself." The quiver in Martha's voice drew Gyneth's eyes to hers, and, to her surprise, she saw that she was frowning. "I think," Martha went on, more firmly, "that you are trying to screen some one else—that you have perhaps sacrificed your inclination, if even it was no more, to spare the feelings of another person." Gyneth

tried to draw her hands away, to turn her face from those soul-searching eyes, but Martha would not spare her. "Suppose," she went on, "you have made a great mistake; suppose, for a mere imagination, you have baulked a man's love, and made him miserable, do you call that self-sacrifice? I call it a piece of pitiful folly. I was right when I told you you knew nothing of love; if you did, you would rather die than pain the man you love. How dare you, how can you set the misery or the happiness of any living creature above his?"

Martha looked inspired as she towered above the shrinking girl; she flung her hands from her and walked a few paces apart. The passion that filled her had found vent at last, and the stifling sense of wrong-doing, which had oppressed her since Maurice went away, fled.

Gyneth stood thinking, and then she said,

"How do you know that you judge me rightly? If I felt that it was selfish and unworthy to take what another deserved so much better, I acted truly."

Martha shook her head.

"Will you never understand?" she said, bitterly. "It is not you or that other who is to be thought of, it is he only; that which he desires is that which will make him happiest—at least, he thinks so, and he must be the judge. Now you have destroyed everything."

She turned away, and stood with hands clasped behind her, gazing out over the sea.

Gyneth felt that this must end.

"We will not talk about this any more. Good-bye, Martha," she said; "let us part friends."

Martha turned round, but there was no yielding in her face.

"I am sorry for you. You have thought yourself a heroine, and you have only made a great mistake. Perhaps you have acted wisely with regard to yourself. You must be the best judge of your own feelings."

She bent down stiffly to receive Gyneth's kiss, but she did not return it.

"You will answer my letters," the girl said, "and tell me how you are. Some day you will see this as I do."

Martha gave her a long look, and some sweetness came back to her eyes.

"No," she said, sadly. "I shall not write; it is useless; it is best for us both, Miss Ralston, not to meet again."

CHAPTER XXIII.

JACKY.

SEPTEMBER was near its close, and the cold, stormy weather of the last few days had cleared Bemford of any lingering visitors.

The Venables had left a few days after Gyneth's parting visit, and had betaken themselves to Florence, all except Gyneth, who went to stay, during the absence of the others, with an invalid cousin in Hertfordshire. According to Louisa, "a self-inflicted penance for refusing to marry Mr. Burridge. She will have plenty of opportunity," that saucy young damsel continued, "of studying the effects of a spinster life on a fastidious temperament. Cousin

Theresa is the most frumpish old fidget I ever saw."

To Martha this departure of her friends had been a relief; but, after a while, as the days grew shorter, and she spent more time indoors, she found herself wishing that she had some one to speak to besides Jacky or Mrs. Jones.

Often this want would make itself felt definitely, and looking up from her book, struck with some thought or expression, she longed for a chance of seeing Gyneth Ralston, and asking her opinion. At first the girl's face had haunted her, and she had resolutely turned from any thought of her. She had made a daily employment, which filled up her mornings, and this was the teaching of Jacky. He could neither read nor write, for his mother averred the school was too far off, and she had far too much to do, "to learn him" herself, and, as he was now eight years old, he was going to ruin as fast as he could. So Miss Burridge bade the boy come to her every day.

It was very hard work. Jacky was as stubborn as a mule, and somewhat dull besides, but,

after one day, when he found that his teacher's will was not to be baffled by his most strenuous obstinacy, he gave in completely, and really began to make progress.

He had an affectionate memory of Miss Ralston and her silver threepence, and he often asked when the pretty lady would come again. This morning he had repeated the question so persistently that a frown came to Martha's face.

"Go and play in the garden a bit, Jacky," she said. "I'll call you when I want you."

"You come too," Jacky said. "I want you."

But it was a cold, stormy morning, the wind swept round the house as if it were tugging at its foundations. The clematis and climbing-roses had already been broken and torn down from the walls by the furious gale, and Martha decided to stay within. She could not get Gyneth Ralston out of her thoughts. Wherever she turned she saw the appeal of those dark pathetic eyes, and heard the girl asking to part from her in friendship. Why had she hardened herself against this sweet woman's love? She knew it was not because of Oliver. Her own

life and his lay so much apart that Gyneth and he need never come in contact, even if she returned to Fulham; it was not because of Oliver.

Martha had been very restless again of late, and had long wakeful nights. During these vigils, and also when Jacky's persistent questioning had given Gyneth's haunting face a yet more vivid presence, she learned the secret that held her back from this girl who had so lovingly treated her; each day it grew plainer and clearer, and to-day it became importunate. Martha knew it was no dead secret about something past and gone beyond recall. Now, as she sat idly in the window, with Jacky's dog's-eared book on her lap, something whispered with horrible distinctness—

"Her happiness is in your hands—you can give it to her."

She writhed as she sat, growing paler and paler from the struggle. In these weeks while she had been hardening herself against her rival, she had grown to believe firmly that Gyneth would mar Maurice's happiness instead of making it. He was sad enough now, she saw

that by his letter, but time would help him—for better he should be sad for a while than fettered with a life-sadness.

"No half-love could content him—I know him too well," she said; and then she remembered that this was the reason why she wished to part Gyneth from Oliver. "And it would be even worse for Maurice; he would be different from Oliver; Oliver would have broken away from a wife who did not satisfy him, and would have given himself up to ambition; but Maurice is too unselfish, and he has fewer outside aims; he would bear everything in the longing for happiness, and the disappointment would eat into his life. No, I must be faithful to him, let this torment be what it will."

Faithful!—it seemed to Martha as if she heard a low mocking laugh beside her—was it keeping faith with her friend to keep from him that which he most wished to know?

"Good God!" and at the words she clasped her hands over her eyes.

It was only a crash of falling timber, for the whirl of the powerful wind had carried a shed

away from the side wall, and sent it in fragments here and there; but to Martha it felt as if a thunderbolt had fallen from Heaven, and that the revelation in her brain had come with the scathing brand of lightning. She had known what Maurice longed for more than any treasure she could have bestowed; it was possible that he had told her of his ill-success so frankly in the hope that she might elicit the secret of Gyneth's refusal; he had not positively said he was hopeless of her love, only that there was an obstacle between them—she had known all this, and what had she done?

Rapidly, as if some curtain had been raised from the past, Martha saw what the aim of her life had been. She had tried to live for others instead of herself, but rarely had any crucial test been offered to her choice. Her brother's love for Gyneth had first taught her that her aim had been stronger in theory than it was in practice, and now a choice was laid before her which held in it the very essence of self-sacrifice, She saw it, but her whole frame quivered, and she turned away. It was not, she told

herself, the giving up of Maurice's friendship, of all the sweet confidence which could never be hers when he should have a wife to share it—it was that the only way of opening Maurice's eyes to the truth would be to confess the true reason of Gyneth's refusal, her knowledge of Martha's love. Even if she did not do this—if she were merely to write to Maurice and tell him that Gyneth loved him, and then leave it to him to win the girl out of her refusal, could she bear it? Martha asked herself.

No—she grew paler and paler from the fierceness of the mental battle—some day, when they were all-in-all to one another—when the misery of any other human being was no more to them than the sea-weed which the waves fling up so idly—they would talk of poor Martha, and Gyneth would tell him everything. No, she had borne it all without once betraying herself to him; it was not selfishness to try to keep his good opinion to the end; besides, had she not bidden Gyneth accept his love.

"There is not a more despicable creature in the world," she said, passionately, "than a

woman who gives her love where it is not wanted. Maurice shall never despise me, and, so long as he keeps apart from her, who can tell him the truth?"

She smiled proudly; she was very pale, but she looked royally beautiful, her eyes full of dark liquid light, her red lips parted, and showing her small white teeth.

All at once she started, and made a forward movement to the window. Jacky had been playing in the garden below, but it was not his absence that drew her attention. The tide was coming in fast, but some of the rocks visible from this upper window beyond the strip of green meadow were still uncovered, and Martha saw something moving on one of these rocks. It must be a child, she thought, no man or woman would so risk themselves, when the sea, maddened by the gale, was leaping high into the air, and would doubtless reach high-water-mark far sooner than usual. Even the lobster-pots had been carried much further in shore yesterday, in expectation of the gale.

Martha did not stay to think. She ran down-

stairs, snatched a shawl, and tied it over her head, for she knew that a hat would be useless in such a wind, and, without pausing to give an alarm, she ran out of the gate and down the road, past the flagstaff swaying fearfully to and fro, as each gust, more furious than the last, threatened to lay the long tapering mast prostrate.

The coast-guard was safe in his cottage, no one was abroad this wild morning, and Martha hurried over the shingle; now the wind, coming in long, slanting swoops, seemingly from all four quarters at a time, almost carried her off her feet; now it whirled her round, and but for her strong will would have flung her down among the stones. Her pace slackened, the fury of the wind beating in her face took her breath away. She stood stifling, exhausted, looking vainly for what she sought. All at once a piercing cry reached her—

"Mother, mother, I'll be drownded! Here's the sea!"

Even before the shrieking that followed the words came, Martha, with head bowed before

the raging wind, was plunging recklessly among the rocks. She could not see Jacky, but she knew he must be there. She had slipped the shawl off her head, for it blinded her, the heavy folds blowing madly every way, and now her hair was floating like a red gold flag across her eyes as she peered among the rocks.

Yes, there he was, and a gasp quivered in Martha's throat; he had been washed off the rock, and carried out by the last wave, and now she could see him just below the seething foam of the green monster wave that was hurling itself onwards to meet her.

Martha gave a loud cry.

"Help! help!" she cried; and then she flung herself forward, and snatched at Jacky's clothes as the wave dashed her down on the rocks.

The wave passed over her head, but she had fallen between two huge pieces of rock, and when she opened her eyes she saw that Jacky lay beside her, but he lay still and white—it seemed to her that he was dead. She tried to rise, but the heavy clinging of her drenched clothes made this difficult. She raised herself

on her knees, and she saw the green curve, high uplifted, of another wave, near at hand. Martha put out all her strength in one shrieking cry for help, and then she dragged Jacky up into her arms, and flung herself backwards with him as far as she could. He was safe on her bosom, but she fell heavily on the rock. The huge wave came rushing on—she pressed Jacky tightly to her bosom, and lost consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ONCE MORE.

IN his last letter Oliver had told Martha that he felt unwilling to revisit Bemford.

"I behaved ill there," he said, "both to you and Miss Ralston. I can't bear to think of the place."

And now he had received Martha's reply. She told him that Gyneth had refused Mr. Penruddock; but Oliver knew this already. Lady Mary had drawn her own conclusions from her son's hasty departure, and had lost no time in telling Mr. Burridge.

Oliver looked up from the letter with a half smile, and yet it can hardly be said that the news gave him hope. When his fit of passionate despair was spent he had thought of himself

with horror. It had seemed to him impossible that Gyneth could ever forgive him his violence.

He was sorry he had been unkind to Martha, but then, she knew him so well, and had all her life been so indulgent to his feelings that he felt certain of her forgiveness.

Now that there was no prospect of rivalry, he could own that he had behaved ill to Maurice, but he did not wish to renew the old friendship. It seemed to Oliver that the image of Gyneth must for ever come between them. Still he knew that his disappointment had lost some of its bitterness since he had read Martha's letter, and had felt sure that his sorrow was shared by Maurice.

He had seen Lady Mary once since her return, and she had entreated him to try his fate again with Miss Ralston, and Oliver thought that when she showed such a lively interest in his welfare she surely would advise him rightly; but Martha's letter had given him full assurance. At least, he might do this: he might ask Miss Ralston's forgiveness, and then he could judge whether he might safely renew his suit.

He had given up the cottage at Fulham, and had rooms in town now. Most of his time was spent in Awlford, and he did not know whether the family had come back to The Elms; but, as he looked up from Martha's letter, Oliver decided that he could have no rest or peace till he had looked Gyneth Ralston in the face once more, and asked her pardon.

He started early in the afternoon for Fulham. How strange it was! the winds to-day seemed to have centred their force at Bemford. It was a quiet chill September day in London, a grey, lowering sky, and a heavy, depressing atmosphere.

Mr. Tew was not at the gate when Oliver reached it. He was sitting beside the fire, smoking his pipe.

Mrs. Tew came forward, and said the family had not returned, except Miss Ralston, and she was only home for a day or two.

Oliver hesitated. He feared Gyneth would refuse to see him, but Mrs. Tew begged him to go up to the house. She had been much concerned that Miss Ralston should come home by

herself, with no one to talk to, and she certainly was not going to turn the first visitor from the door.

Oliver's courage had forsaken him, but, going up the drive, he saw Gyneth come out of the house, evidently starting for a walk.

She drew back, but next moment she came forward, and shook hands with Mr. Burridge.

"My people are all away," she said, smiling.

"Yes. I know I ought not to intrude upon you. I won't come in, but may I speak to you; just a few minutes, I won't keep you long."

Gyneth felt very timid. She was glad to have seen Mr. Burridge again, and to have shown him that she bore no grudge against him, but she thought any talk with him must be uncomfortable. Oliver stood still, formerly he would at once have led the way to the Terrace, but the sight of Gyneth had doubled his shame; he stood waiting for his sentence.

Instead of turning to the Terrace, Gyneth began to walk down the drive.

"How is your sister?" she said, nervously.

"Better, I hope, but I have not seen her"—

then he paused. Never in his life before had Oliver Burridge felt so little sure of himself. It seemed to him that he could not ask Gyneth's forgiveness in any way fit to be listened to. He wished he had not come, she would only despise him more and more for his blundering awkwardness. So the poor fellow said, in a broken, abrupt way—"I have not seen her since that day I hate to think of—I mean my rudeness. If you knew how I have longed to ask your pardon, I believe you would forgive me."

Gyneth looked at him as he ended. He seemed so crushed, so changed, that the girl longed to soothe him. Her smile, so sweet, so frank, so cordial, was like balm to his wounded suffering heart.

"Indeed," she said, earnestly, "there is nothing to forgive, but I can't tell you how glad I am to be friends again."

Oliver's eyes sparkled. It seemed as if a load had been taken off his life.

"You are an angel," he said; "there is no one like you in the world."

Gyneth was silent; she was glad to be re-

conciled, but she hoped Oliver would not go on with any more lover-like talk.

"I hope all goes on well at Awlford," she said, "and that there has not been any further disturbance among the work-people?"

"All is quiet, thank you, and all goes well," and again Oliver was silent; he felt that he had better be content with what he had gained—that it was a great matter to be forgiven and taken into favour again. His repentance was real, and he did not feel as another man might have felt when forgiven, that Gyneth's kindness excused his behaviour; and yet each time he looked at her he felt more madly certain that he could not know happiness without this girl. But she had refused him before he so spoke to her; was it likely she would now listen to him, when he had shown her what conduct he was capable of? She would fear for the future. How could he make her believe that he longed to put his life into her hands to shape and control, as she saw it needed improvement? Just now Oliver felt that she represented the all of life to him, and that, if she would only love him, all other

ambitions might go by as worthless in comparison.

"Did you ever feel?" he said, and suddenly stopped; he saw the smile fade from her face, and there was the timid, ill-assured look which was so becoming to her pensive beauty, and yet which he knew betokened shyness.

"I beg your pardon," she said, for his silence continued.

"Well,"—he shrugged his shoulders,—"I am in for it now," he thought; "if she's angry, I must bear it. I was asking an absurd question," he said, aloud; "it is not likely you could feel as an impulsive, rough fellow feels. I was going to say did you ever feel utter wonder at your own folly and want of judgment? It seems to me as if I had only just learned your true value, and the reverence due to you, Miss Ralston."

The deep humility of his tone touched Gyneth. She smiled at him.

"Friends must not flatter one another." She tried to speak lightly, for she did not want to talk of "feelings" with Mr. Burridge. "I suppose,"

she went on, "if we like people, we exaggerate their good qualities, and, if we don't like them, we can only see faults. I wonder if one person was ever yet justly and thoroughly estimated by another?"

"That would be a large question," he said, eagerly; looking at her sweet face, and watching its varying expression, he was quickly losing self-restraint. "It is possible that the individual opinion may be the true one; I am sure that there are natures which have such power for good over men, however erring, that, if this influence were always beside them, their whole nature might be transformed into the phase which the special influence wished to produce."

Their eyes met as he ended, and Gyneth's colour deepened.

"I think that is ascribing too much to mere human influence;" and then, before he could speak, she went on, quickly, "Will you please remember me very kindly to your sister when you write?"

They were near the gate now, and she stood

still, hoping that he would leave her, but Oliver knew that this was his last chance; it seemed to him that his submission had softened her feelings towards him. Next time they met, she would have recovered from this softening, and would, perhaps, meet him with indifference.

But still he hesitated; he thought of the dog who flung away the substance, while he snatched at that which proved only a fleeting shadow; but the thought did not help him; he turned back from the gate.

"Will you give me five minutes longer?"

He spoke so very gently, so unlike his old masterful tone, that she could not refuse, spite of her unwillingness to stay with him.

"You have been so good to Martha, and I have never thanked you."

Gyneth felt greatly relieved. Just now a look had come into Mr. Burridge's eyes which had made her fear that he was about to speak again of his attachment.

"I like your sister so much," she said, frankly. "I had quite counted on her society this

winter, but she said you would probably give up the cottage."

"I have done so; a tenant offered himself before my term expired, and my landlord has let me off. I live in town now, when I am not at Awlford. But I must tell you one thing about poor Martha; she is so fond of me that she has always wished to keep me for herself, I believe, and yet you have made such an impression on her that she told me you are the only person she could love as a sister."

"She has not told you that lately, I think—I do not think she cares for my friendship now." There was pain in Gyneth's voice, and she sighed.

Oliver looked at her; there was a question in his eyes; then he checked himself, and spoke hastily.

"You see what you could do for our lives—you could make Martha happy, and you could make me whatever you choose. I put my life in your hands; till now I feel it has been largely wasted—governed by self; will you not govern it for me, and let me devote it to you?"

There was a silence. Gyneth's hands had pressed themselves together; she looked deeply pained.

"I am very sorry," she said. "I am much more sorry than I was before, but indeed it cannot be. I"—she looked up at him, and then she bent down her face, while a blush of shame swept warmly over it—"I have no love left to give anyone. Now you will leave me, will you not? I will always be your friend."

She could not raise her eyes to Oliver's, and it was well for him that she did not. He held down his anger by a supreme effort, but hatred towards the owner of this love which he so coveted burned in his eyes as he looked at Gyneth—looked as if he were trying to gather for ever into memory every charming expression and feature, every nameless grace of the manner and movement that so bewitched him, for he felt this was the last time he should be thus alone with Gyneth Ralston.

"No," he said, "you must forgive if I am ungrateful, but there is kindness one cannot

accept—it would destroy. I cannot be your friend—I love you too much. You hate me to say it—but," he said, in a low, hoarse voice, "I must say it—I love you more than ever"—he paused; she kept her eyes on the ground; she did not see his wrung, despairing look; he felt, with the sure conviction which is like a doom, that if ever they saw one another again, they must be strangers—"say good-bye to me—it is the last time. I will not trouble you again."

He took both her hands in his, and clasped them so tightly that she almost cried out with pain; then, as he met her eyes, the tender pity in them was more than he could bear; he let the hands fall abruptly, and hurried away without one backward look.

He went to town dully, doggedly, not thinking all the way, having a dim notion that, if he did think, he must do something foolish; he would not go to his rooms at all, but he looked in at his office. His clerk hurried forward.

"This came two hours ago, sir," he said, and he put a telegram in Oliver's hands.

It was very brief, and was sent by the doctor from Bemford:—

"*Come down at once—your sister is very ill.*"

Of course there was nothing to be done but to start at once for Bemford.

CHAPTER XXV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

MARTHA lay on the sofa in the little bow-windowed room, listening to the sound of the sea. Oliver had not come, but she knew that he was on his road. The doctor had been summoned when she and Jacky were rescued, —for help had reached them after Martha's last outcry,—but, though he said the boy would do well enough, he seemed anxious about Miss Burridge, and asked if her friends had been sent for; then, finding that Jane had contented herself with a post letter, he sent a telegram to her brother.

Martha had been told this, and she lay still—waiting for Oliver. She would not stay in bed

—in bed she could not see the sea. Cruel as it had been to her, she loved it still. Her will had given her strength, and, almost without Jane's help, she had tottered across to the little sitting-room, and sank down on the sofa. This room had shared her hopes, her glad awaiting of Maurice's visits; it cheered her now. She would have liked to summon Maurice. At least, she had thought this at first, but as she recovered from the weak stupor of first awakening she felt it could not be. She could never look on Maurice Penruddock's face again in this life.

While she lay among the rocks, with Jacky in her arms, before consciousness left her, Martha had wakened, as it were, from a dream, and had seen the past weeks face to face, not only as they had been to her, but to others. She had lived through the hours again, and had learned the truth about herself.

Now, as she lay on the sofa, she was trying to call back the clear knowledge which had then revealed itself, but as she tried to fix on a thought, and follow it out, she felt sick and

feeble. The room seemed to go round, and instinctively she clung to the sofa, as if she were falling.

Then came a long pause .... When Martha looked up, the sun was shining in at the window, and Oliver stood beside her.

How pale and anxious he was, Martha thought, then she looked round her. She was no longer on the sofa, she was in bed, and yet there was the bow-window, and the sun shining on the sea.

"You have been ill, dear," Oliver said, gently.

Martha smiled. It seemed to her that she had got her brother back, he was hers again. No one came between them now.

"Will you sit down?" she said, faintly. "You are sure you are not in a hurry, Oliver?"

He sat down beside the bed; the colour came into his face. Poor Martha! his heart ached as he looked back. How very long it was since he had found time to sit and talk with her.

"I am here for you only, dear—I am not

going away till you are better," he said, in a dull, choked voice. "I want to try and make you well, Martha."

A feverish light came into her eyes.

"Did the doctor say I should get well?" she asked.

Oliver turned away as he answered—

"He has not been here to-day, and yesterday when I arrived you had not roused from your faint, and he said he could not tell how you were till you were conscious again."

"Is Jacky well?" she said.

Oliver frowned.

"He's well enough, the little scamp! I have a mind to scold you, dear"—tears came rushing to his eyes—"for helping him at the risk of your life."

"There was no one else," she said, simply.

Her hand, whiter than ever, lay on the coverlet, and Oliver held it in his. How much these two longed to say to one another; and yet words would not come to either. Perhaps, when their eyes met, they learned some of one another's thoughts.

Martha soon dozed off again, and Oliver sat looking at the blue-veined hand that lay in his. Yesterday when he arrived he had found her insensible, and he had watched beside her for hours. All his warm love for her had come back in a full tide. It seemed as if they were children again at Deeping. What could he do without Martha, the kind, loving sister whose life had been given up to him.

Presently the doctor came, and she roused. Oliver followed him out of the room when he had seen his patient.

"In an ordinary case," the doctor said, putting on his gloves, and buttoning his coat, as if he were talking on an indifferent subject, "or, perhaps, to speak more correctly, in the case of another person, I should say life was going out like the tide, but in this case the will has such extraordinary power—such very remarkable vitality that"—here came a shrug of the shoulders—"I really cannot speak definitely, only as there has evidently been, before this, something amiss with the heart—well, I should advise an absence of all contradiction—all," he said, pomp-

ously; "it is an extraordinary case, really most extraordinary, and we must hope for the best; quiet—perfect quiet—is imperative." Then, with a few medical instructions, he bowed, stepped up into his gig, and drove away smiling.

When Oliver went back to his sister, she was sitting up, propped by pillows. She smiled as he came in.

"It is worth being ill to see you here, dear Oliver," she said, with so loving a look that his heart ached. "Now tell me what the doctor says."

Oliver remembered the doctor's caution.

"He evidently thinks you are superior to most people," he said, gravely; "he declines to give a decided opinion; he says you must keep very quiet."

Martha lay still; but in a few minutes she looked at her brother.

"I do not think I shall get well, dearest, but I would rather know your opinion. I am not trifling in this," she said, faintly—"I have a reason in asking."

The sadness in her brother's eyes struck

her, and she noticed that he looked away.

"I hope you will get well, dear," he said.

She did not answer. As he sat watching her, she grew paler yet, as if all colour were leaving her face; her eyes, too, seemed to lose light and colour, but as the sun shone on her loosened hair, it looked like waves of gold against the white pillow over which it spread.

To Oliver's impulsive nature, it seemed as if he must do something to stop the approach of death, for he thought Martha was dying. It was awful that there should be no one but himself and Jane to help Martha through these last hours. He knew that she would not care to see the clergyman of Bemford; she had always clung to her own faith; but he thought of Gyneth Ralston, if she would come, it must surely comfort his sister.

"Would you like to see Miss Ralston, dear?" he said.

The name seemed to call back Martha's spirit; she raised herself, a tiny glow showed on the pale cheeks, and the eyes brightened instantly.

"No—I could not talk to her if she came; but, Oliver—presently I will give you a message."

He put his hand on hers, and the touch drew their hearts nearer than they had been this long while ....

Martha's eyes closed, and she seemed to sleep .... but all at once she looked with a smile into those honest blue eyes watching her face so sadly.

"I thought it was Deeping again, dear, and we were with Maurice in the wood." The colour came into her face. "We did not know how happy we were then;"—a pause;—"perhaps *I* did."

Oliver bent down and kissed the hand he held, to hide his fast-coming tears. He had completely broken down.

"Poor dear Martha!" he said, "you have not been made as happy as you ought to have been; I have been selfish often; if you——" and then he checked himself. Where was the use of telling her the plans for her future happiness he had made? Would he

have executed them? It was hardly likely, he thought, in the new-born self-distrust which clung to him, when for so long he had not even troubled himself to give her the happiness which the mere sight of him plainly caused, that he would ever have fulfilled mere intentions. Again his heart was wrung with sore pain. "You have much to forgive in me, darling; I have thought too much of myself,"—he leant fondly over her—"and you have given up your whole life to me." He kissed her.

The flush deepened on Martha's face till it looked like shame.

"You must not think it," she said, eagerly, while the effort she was making brought her breath in quick, irregular beats. "I have nothing to forgive you. I have sought my own happiness too, Oliver, and—and failed." His look of keen, startled inquiry made her eyes droop, and her voice faltered. He turned away instinctively, and then she went on, with a sigh of relief; she was not suffering, except from faintness, but an increasing sense of oppression warned her to hasten.

"We had both set our hearts on what was not meant for us, but I have done worse. I"—he had turned round again to look at her in his utter surprise; Oliver thought of his sister as the most guileless creature living, and it sounded like delirium to hear her lay claim to wrong-doing; his look checked her words, again her eyes fell under his, and once more he turned away—"I"—she spoke out strongly, as if determined not to conceal her fault—"knew a secret which would have made two people happy, and I kept it back. Oliver, you will set right the wrong I did to her."

He did not look round this time. That strange power of divination which visits us at times—tearing away veils which, but for our own self-absorption and want of real sympathy, could never have been drawn over our sight—lightened broadly across Oliver's brain, and he understood.

In one instant he saw and knew all. The pent-up misery of these last months of his sister's life, the hopelessness of his own love for Gyneth Ralston; and also this—and he shrank

from it with abhorrence still—the happy future that now lay before the lovers.

"Oliver,"—her voice was very faint, and, with an intense effort of will, she stretched out her pale fingers and touched him.

He started, and looked at her; the wan, imploring face compelled him to answer.

"I understand, dear, but it will right itself; you were not to blame," he added, huskily, for it seemed to him that her repentance was overstrained. "They will find each other out."

"Oliver, you must tell Maurice she loves him."

He got up and walked to the window, he was resolved to free himself from the spell of Martha's beseeching eyes.

He stood looking out over the sea. No, he could not do this; he could not do what she asked—he would not; he would give his life to make Gyneth happy, but, if this could only be done by offering her love to Maurice Penruddock, Oliver told himself it should never be done—by him, at least. If it were to be, it would happen. He did not disguise from himself that the fact stood before him bare and

cruel. Martha was too surely passing away from all earthly hope and love, and if the knowledge that his sister loved Maurice had caused Gyneth's refusal, then she would feel free when life was over, and, if Penruddock was in earnest, he would ask her again ; he need not put this useless torture on himself.

Oliver set his teeth hard, and turned to look at Martha. While he had stood self-absorbed, she had risen from the bed, and now she stood clinging to it, more like the wraith of some departed soul than a living woman, as she stood wrapped in her long, white dressing-gown, her red-gold hair reaching to her waist.

"Oh, Martha, what are you doing?" Oliver said, reproachfully, and he hurried forward to support her.

"You will promise to set right the wrong I have done," she said ; a burning light shone in her eyes, and she clasped her long fingers round his wrist.

"No, I cannot. You must lie down, dear ; you are doing yourself harm."

He stretched across, and rang the bell.

Martha spoke again.

"If you do not promise"—she said, faintly, "I must send for Maurice."

Then she fell against his shoulder, in utter unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OLD FRIENDS.

MAURICE PENRUDDOCK was very sad. This morning, as he sat in his rooms in Brick Court, he had seen in the paper the announcement of Martha's death, "after a short illness." It came on him with a shock, and it seemed to him that this was the keenest sorrow he had known. He was young when he lost both his guardian and his father; he hardly knew what he had lost in either of them. But Martha, the kind, sympathetic friend who had so fully shared his confidence, on whose judgment he felt such dependence, whose affection was so certain, so unfailing—as he realised that he had lost her, and looked forward, there was a blank in his life which made him feel very sad and lonely.

It was so sudden, too; she had looked well enough, he thought, at Bemford. In spite of the estrangement that had come between them, he thought Oliver might have written, knowing his affection for Martha—surely he might have told him she was very ill. Then he looked at the paper again and saw that she had died a week before. Oliver must have left Bemford; by this time he was in town, unless he had gone to Awlford.

"Poor fellow, how lonely he will be!" Maurice thought, "though he never half appreciated Martha." And then he smiled sadly, and wondered if anyone besides himself had ever talked freely enough with this remarkable woman to realise her gifts. As he sat thinking, he felt that he must know something more about this last illness of Martha's; she might have sent him a message, some last loving word. "I was the only friend she had, she said so."

The day wore on, and this wish to hear about her became fixed; he determined to call on Oliver, and, if he did not find him in town, to write to him.

He had reached the bottom of the stairs, and was going out of the house when Oliver came hurrying towards him from the opposite side of the way.

"How fortunate I had not started!" Maurice said. "I might have missed you. I was going to look you up."

Oliver did not smile; he seemed sorry rather than glad that the meeting had happened.

"You know, then?" he said, abruptly.

"Yes,"—Maurice looked grave,—"but come in, won't you?"

"No," said Oliver, bluntly. "I'd rather not come in. How did you know?"

"I saw it in the paper just now, but I want to hear more. Was she ill long?"

Oliver told him of Jacky's rescue, of the state in which he found Martha, and then of her second fainting fit.

"She never spoke again after that, though she suffered terribly," he said, with a sigh; "she was conscious, she knew me to the end; and, I think,"—a very bitter look crossed his face,—"I think she understood all I said to her."

They had been standing still, but now Maurice said—

"If you won't come in, shall we go into the gardens while you tell me?" And he led the way to the Inner Temple Garden.

Oliver followed, still with the same dull, unwilling look. Maurice could not speak for some minutes; at last he said—

"You know how I feel for you, my dear fellow; I feel, too, that I have lost the kindest friend that a man ever had." He paused. "Do you think she suffered to the end?" he said presently, in a sad voice.

"I am sure she did not at the last."

"Poor, dear Martha!" said Maurice.

Oliver frowned, but he did not answer. Then they walked up and down the Garden in silence. Maurice was puzzled. Oliver's manner was full of mute reproof.

"I wish I had known about it," Penruddock said, after awhile. "I should like to have followed her to the grave."

"Would you? I did not think you cared enough——"

"She knew better," Maurice said, with some warmth.

He was sorry for Oliver, but it seemed to him that this taunt ought not to have been spoken. Then old friendship prevailed.

"Come, old fellow," he said, "her memory ought to bind us together. How good she always was to both of us!" There were tears in Penruddock's eyes.

"Yes," Oliver said, quickly. "She was too good, poor girl!—far better to us than we deserved."

"She was a good woman, and I suppose that explains everything."

Oliver seemed horribly ill at ease; he frowned, compressed his lips, and looked about him impatiently. A bystander would have said he longed to pick a quarrel with his companion. Maurice scarcely knew what to say, for Oliver seemed to get irritable each time he spoke of Martha.

"I wish I had seen her once more," Penruddock said. "And yet we were very happy together that day at Bemford. She looked so

well then, no one could have thought the end so near; she was so bright and full of loving sympathy. I wonder if she would have cared to see me again?" He was speaking to himself more than to Oliver. "There would not have been time to have sent for me, I suppose?"

He was thinking that of late he had been as much to Martha as Oliver had been, for she had said his letters were more frequent; and he felt a strong right in this dear, lost friend.

"I don't know," Oliver said, slowly; "but if I had thought of it I should not have sent for you. I did not want you."

Penruddock looked at him in surprise, but Oliver's head was turned away. Maurice wondered why he had come to seek him at such a time, for surely he was bent on making a quarrel. He looked round, they were in a quiet corner of the gardens, quite free from observation.

"Oliver," Penruddock said, "I owe you more than you can ever owe me—years of friendship, and all the happy time when we were boys together—why can we not be friends

still? Or have you any grudge against me?"

Oliver shook his head, but there was sadness as well as anger in his face.

"My dear fellow," Maurice said, affectionately, "this has been a terrible wrench for you. Come away with me into the country for a few days. I'll go wherever you like, and I want to hear all you can tell me about dear Martha."

His sister's name brought back the cloud to Oliver's face, he turned suddenly, so as to face Maurice, and began to speak in a quick, abrupt way.

"We can't be friends—it is impossible—it could only be pretence. I have a message to you from Martha." It seemed to his eager listener that Oliver flushed with anger while he spoke. "She said I was to tell you that you had quite mistaken about Miss Ralston's feelings for you, that you were to persevere."

He gave a rapid look to see how his tidings were received; for an instant Maurice stood incredulous, unable to believe this was real, and then Oliver felt both his hands warmly grasped by his old friend.

"You are the noble fellow I always thought you, Burridge. God bless you!"

But Oliver freed his hands impatiently.

"Stop," he said, "don't go on in a mistake. I do not wish you success; I have nothing to do with it. I have done it entirely against my will, but she wished it all through, and I promised her at the last."

His face quivered at the memory, quivered till it looked wrung with pain, but he turned resolutely away, and Maurice let him go. This was hardly the moment, he felt, for pressing his affection on Oliver.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TWO UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER.

OCTOBER had gone by, less bright and chill than it sometimes is, and without the echo of summer which often ushers in St. Luke's anniversary. It had altogether been a dark, dull month.

But now, here was November, bright and clear, as if it and its forerunner had changed seasons for pastime.

The travellers had come back to The Elms, grumbling at the weather. It had spoiled excursions for Louisa and her uncle, and Mrs. Venables was suffering much from rheumatism. They found Gyneth sorrowing for Martha's death. She had written to Oliver to express

her sympathy, but he had not replied to her at any length. He told her briefly what had happened, and said he was with his sister to the last, and that she had suffered much, but that the end had been peaceful. It was very unsatisfactory to the girl's loving heart not to hear more, and she wished she could find out the servant, Jane, and learn more particulars. But she had no clue, and she shrank from again writing to Oliver, his letter had been so cold and forced.

Louisa had never forgiven her sister for refusing Mr. Burridge, and to-day, when she and her aunt were sitting alone together, she told Mrs. Venables that she believed Gyneth's depression arose from vexation at her own folly.

"Lady Mary spoke to me seriously about it; she said it was so injudicious of Kitty to refuse Mr. Burridge, and of course she is such a judge."

"Why is she such a judge?" Mrs. Venables asked.

Louisa disliked her aunt's simple, direct way of putting things, but she thought this question

presumptuous. How could her aunt, who had never gone in for style or fashion, venture to question an opinion agreed on by Lady Mary and herself? Louisa felt that she had devoted so much time and observation to the ways of the world that she could arrange Kitty's future far better than her old-fashioned aunt could.

"Oh," she continued, carelessly, "she knows about everything."

Mrs. Venables smiled.

"Has Kitty come in?" she said.

"I don't think so. She has gone to see some of those poor people of hers. I know she'll bring home a fever or something one of these days." Louisa was in a discontented mood, and she went and stood by the window. "What can she be doing? she is so much later than usual; it's growing dark," she said, fretfully.

Meantime Gyneth had gone to see some of her poor friends near the cabbage grounds. She learned that one family had moved during her absence, and now lived nearly a mile nearer London, as the husband had got employment at

the gas works. But Gyneth was a good walker, and she thought she should be able to go this distance before dusk. She had some difficulty in finding the house in such a multitude of squalid dwellings, but she succeeded, and, having paid her visit, set out to return along the high-road.

Her visits had cheered her; while she listened patiently to the trials and anxieties of her poor friends, she had got roused out of her own sorrow and the loneliness that had oppressed her since her return to The Elms, and she walked along briskly. Yesterday, as she thought of Martha, it seemed as though her own sacrifice had been useless, but now she was able to rejoice that she had made it. It would have added a deep bitterness to her sorrow for her friend if she had to feel that she had willingly robbed Martha of the love she coveted.

All at once she heard quick steps behind her. They quickened as they came nearer, and Gyneth felt that some one was trying to overtake her. She half turned, and there was Mr. Penruddock. His eyes sparkled, his face was full of delight, as he held her hand in his.

"I am on my way to The Elms," he said. "May I walk back with you?"

Gyneth bowed, and walked on beside him, but she felt puzzled; she thought he would have avoided her.

When they came to the top of the road leading to new Wandsworth bridge, Maurice stopped.

"Shall we go down here?" he said. "It will be pleasanter beside the river."

Gyneth said, "Yes, it is pleasanter," and then she felt tongue-tied—words seemed to have left her, and they walked on in silence.

"I want to say something to you," he said, presently. "You told me at Bemford that I must never again speak to you as I then did; but I must disobey—I cannot be satisfied with the answer you gave me then."

She had grown rosy while he spoke, but there was no vexation in her face, a strange, sweet agitation possessed her, and yet she did not speak. How could she answer without a question? And now, though she had longed for this moment, had sorrowed because she thought such happiness lost to her for ever—yet, now

it had come, she seemed to wish to delay it—she was afraid of the joy so near.

She looked round. They had reached a path beside the Thames; the wet summer had swollen the river, and tall trees which, in dry seasons, bordered the water, now rose out of it phantom-like in the soft evening mist, thirty feet or so from the bank. Long green lines of half-drowned meadow showed here and there, and dripping bushes raised themselves from the overflow, and made a screen between the path and the river. The sun was sinking, a semi-golden haze enveloped the scene, and gave it a weird beauty. It was very lonely, not even a boat showed itself on the broad grey gold water to disturb the intense solitude. Gyneth felt that it was very sweet to have Mr. Penruddock beside her, and yet she trembled with a vague timidity.

But Maurice was growing impatient, as he walked by her side, noting the flush, and then the paling of her sweet face; he wanted her eyes to meet his, and to read in them her answer to his love.

"Gyneth, you will not send me away again?" He spoke in a pleading, earnest voice.

This was a direct question, but still she hesitated. Something made her look up at him for answer, and then the love in his eyes made hers droop quickly, and brought the warm blood to her cheeks.

Maurice took her hand and drew it through his arm, and they walked on silently through the golden mist.

Gyneth was thinking of Martha, the rush of joy that swept over her seemed like treason to the dear dead friend; and then she looked at the misty gold on the water, it seemed to tell her that Martha was at peace.

How often she had gazed at the river this summer, and had tried to understand herself, and the mystery of pain and doubt that had oppressed her. Now all was clear. Love had revealed himself, and she need not fear or doubt her own feelings evermore. It seemed as if she had all at once found the key to some solemn mystery, in the rush of warm feeling that was spreading over her, and she turned to Maurice, her sweet face full of serious thought as she met those dear

eyes fixed inquiringly on her face. Gyneth thrilled through from head to foot; all thought of self and of Martha fled—her soul seemed to leave her, and to float softly into his.

He pressed her hand closely to him.

"Gyneth, I hardly know what life has been like," he said, "since that day—too miserable to remember."

This was a new reading of the past. It was not easy to realise that love for her could have made him miserable. She looked up at him timidly, yet with such sweet pity in her eyes.

"Forgive me; I can't bear to think I have grieved you, even for a moment," she said, softly.

They had reached the end of the path; a lane crossed it leading down from the high road, and this lane was bordered by the fence of grounds which stretched down to the water's edge. Maurice turned back along the raised path.

"You are not tired, I hope," he said; but he went on without waiting for her answer. "I was

more miserable than you can guess, and I am not happy yet." Then he put his other hand across, and clasped hers firmly, while he spoke rapidly and earnestly. "I only feel that you tolerate my love. Can you say you love me? I can hardly believe it. Tell me, dearest."

She looked up at him with such a bright smile, a smile full of wonder, and then her eyes fell under his glowing gaze. It seemed to Maurice as if the mist were made of rainbow tints; he was wrapped in a sunshine of joy, but he saw her lips part timidly, and he waited, bending closely over her sweet face.

"Tell me—say you love me."

"I love you!" she whispered, and then she blushed beautifully, as Maurice took her hand, and his arm came round her.

"You darling!"

And then they stood beside the misty river, steeped in the bliss of that moment which no words can paint, no art can realise, that exquisite sense of union and perfect faith in each other's love which it is not given to all to know.

"Aunt,"—Louisa spoke so suddenly from her post at the window that Mrs. Venables looked up with alarm in her gentle face,—"what do you think? Here is Kitty at last, and Mr. Penruddock is with her. They are coming up the drive, looking as happy as——gracious me! Aunt, I do believe they are engaged."

And, at the prospect of such good fortune for the sister who Louisa had prophesied would never have another offer, as a judgment for her folly, the blue-eyed maiden ran up and kissed her aunt, and had time for several skips of delight before this happy pair of lovers came into the room.

When Lady Mary heard of the engagement between her son and Gyneth, she said it was a great mistake; but, when she found that the Miss Ralstons would be liberally portioned by their uncle instead of having to wait for what he might leave at his death, she quickly relented; though in moments of confidence she still tells intimate friends that poor dear Maurice

made a mistake, and married the wrong sister. "The youngest is such a bright, wise little girl —so much *savoir-faire* and ballast about her."

There was a gay wedding in the sweet spring-time of not many years ago at grey old Fulham church, and people made the stereotyped remark that the bride and her husband "looked as if they were made for one another."

Louisa was a charming-looking bridesmaid, and fluttered and danced about in the highest spirits; but, as soon as the excitement of the wedding was over, in her heart she thought that Kitty was very selfish and imprudent in not marrying Mr. Burridge.

And Oliver. He has not married. He works harder than ever, and it is said he will be returned for Awlford at the next election. He is graver, quieter, perhaps a little cynical, but always good, straightforward, and earnest, a man of a thousand; some people say, a man who will leave his mark on the age, but all agree that he is a man to be depended on. Sometimes he meets Mr. and Mrs. Penruddock in society, but they do not visit intimately.

Oliver seems happiest when he can get down to Bemford, and spend a few days near the myrtle-covered grave in the churchyard by the sea.

When Maurice and Gyneth, in their truly happy home, talk of Martha, it is with deepest love and gratitude; they cherish her in their hearts as the noblest and dearest friend of their united lives. In Gyneth's own little sitting-room is the picture she painted from memory of a tall lady with a crown of red-gold hair, and a background of sea; and Gyneth teaches her children to love "Dear Aunt Martha," as the picture is called.

THE END.

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